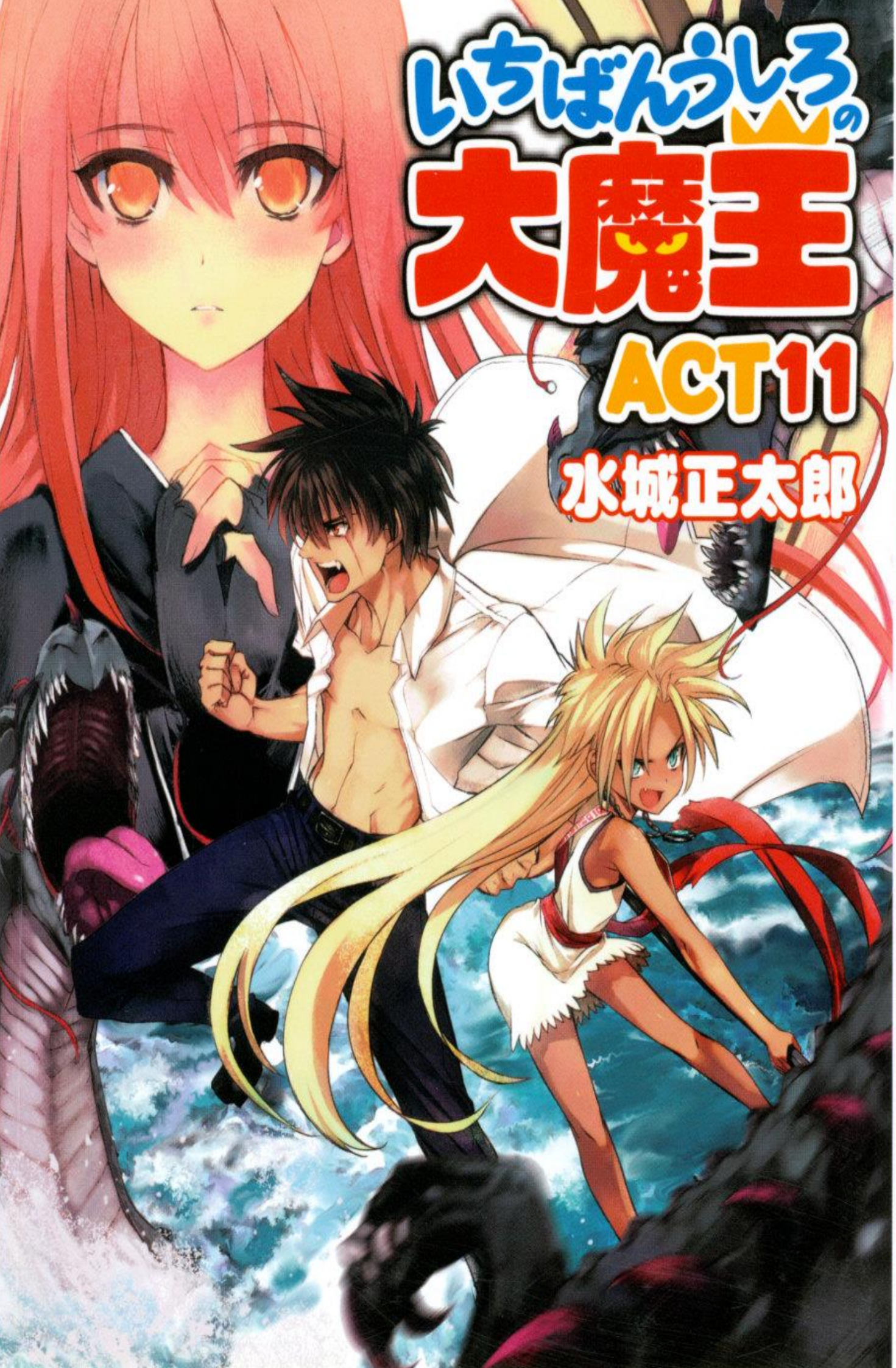

み01-02-11

水城正太郎

いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT11

HJ文庫

HOBBY JAPAN

いちばんうしろの
大魔王
ACT11

すると、それに応えるかのように、新たな魔王は
恍惚として見えない空に向けて両手を広げた。
「これは……すごいね。見える。
みんなの記録が、わかる」

「その……うまく言えないけど」
阿九斗はけーなの髪に顔をうずめるようにして耳元に口を寄せた。
「う……うん」

登場人物紹介

服部絢子（はっとりじゅんこ）

阿九斗に対する恋心は強まる一方の、純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗の発言に動揺を隠しきれない。

紗伊阿九斗（さいあくと）

けーなの支配下に置かれることで何とか社会復帰。しかし彼の人生に平穏は訪れない……？

江藤不二子（えとうふじこ）

阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。真の黒魔術の再興を目指している。

曽我けーな（そが）

日本の現皇帝陛下。世界のカギを握る存在、なのだろうか？

三輪寛（みわひろし）

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なっていたが、けーなの皇帝即位後はその御側係に。いたずら好き。

リリィ白石（しらいし）

小粋な帽子がトレードマークの生徒会長。噛噺っ早く「小さい」と言われると切れてしまう。

大竹美智恵（おおたけみちえ）

蝙蝠の群れに変身できる生徒会副会長。語尾は「ありんす」

アルヌール

長身のリラダンにして生徒会書記。基本「ぐが」としか言わない。

神山カンナ（かみやま）

狼に変身する能力を持つ生徒会会計の神山カンナ。語尾は「ぎゃ」。

木多淑恵（きたよしえ）

魔王戦争の一因を作ってしまったが、阿九斗のことを気に入り、その後は協力する。今は何となく学院に居ついている。

けいす

初代魔王ゼロと共に仮想空間内にいた小柄なリラダンの少女。役目は無くなってしまったが、何となく淑恵の元に留まっている。

Prologue

A room contained an antique leather chair and a table that showed off the rings of the tree it was made from. But the room had no furnishings besides the desk, the chair, and the abstract painting on the wall.

The room was located in the center of the imperial capital and the palace was visible from the window. Some strange people were gathered inside.

Mask-like objects hid some of their faces, but their silhouettes were very strange looking. On the other hand, those who left their faces exposed had well-featured faces. Everyone in the group seemed to draw the eye in some way or another.

“If the Jewel Branch of Hourai’s seal has been broken, those with imperial blood will gather in the empire.”

One of them spoke. His appearance was well suited for his behavior which was showy to the point of seeming sarcastic. His name was Kurahashi Kento. He was a member of CIMO 8 and he had the greatest brains and abilities of the group. His codename was USD, he was rumored to have the greatest intellect of the human race, and he was the one member who did not hide his identity.

“Whoever those people may be, I want to make it clear that we will ultimately ally with the current empress.”

Kento looked around at the other members in search of agreement.

It was clear he had the most influence of the group. But one voice did rise in argument.

“You always jump right to the conclusion. For one thing, the government can’t interfere with the empress. And isn’t CIMO 8 a group of individualists?”

None of the people there were moving their mouths, but the voice was definitely there.

Kento replied without a hint of confusion.

“And as individualists, we were forced to join together for our original objective. And that original objective is of course what Yamato Bouichirou wanted. And that is…”

The voice from nowhere finished Kento’s sentence as if to say it understood.

“To appease the extra-universal beings. And if that fails, to fight and defeat them.”

The voice then added its own thought.

“I think our chances of appeasing them are greater.”

“I hope you are right,” said Kento coldly as he looked down at his feet.

A large dog was curled up there. It had long hair, so its eyes and drooping ears were almost completely buried below the fur. If it had not moved, it would have looked like a large mop.

The dog languidly raised its head, looked up at Kento, and moved its mouth.

“Are you saying you can’t believe me when I say the chances are good?”

The movements of its mouth did indeed match the voice.

Kento accepted it as normal, shook his head, and spoke as candidly as if speaking to an old friend.

“Even if you were one of them, you can’t know for sure.”

“It is true I do not represent them.”

The dog spoke to indicate he was a part of “them”. His codename was The One and he was a rare talking dog. However, his true identity was not the dog.

“You are the only human in this world who is from ‘there’, so you don’t get to say you don’t represent them.”

Kento’s calm voice sounded slightly disagreeable.

The One bared his canine teeth to form a sarcastic smile.

“That’s another way to think about it. Then again, I betrayed them.”

A strange tension filled the air between them.

But a girl’s voice broke through that atmosphere.

“Kento, One, you always end up like this when you meet. Anyway, what are we supposed to do?”

The girl casually placed a hand on the side of her head and tilted her head, but she had a strangely bewitching aura to her. Kento and The One lowered their shoulders in disappointment.

“Kei, we will be protecting the current empress as a group,” said Kento as a warning.

The girl named Kei placed a hand on her chin and looked upwards.

“Hmm, but we aren’t the ones to decide if the empress is up to the task. That demon king has the empress on his side, right? Doesn’t that make us enemies of the empress?”

“But only the empress can use the Jewel Branch of Hourai and we need the power that has awoken. That is most likely the only power that can oppose the extra-universal beings.”

“Then it doesn’t matter who the empress is. We just want to use that power, right?”

Kei leaned back in her chair as if sulking and she clasped her hands behind her head.

“Yes, but the empress makes that power usable. And yet we only need the power. That creates a contradiction. In other words, we must explain our reasoning to the empress and have her obey us.”

Kei’s expression made it clear she did not quite understand.

“Do you really think that’ll work? Would that demon king really listen to us?”

“From what I have seen of his personality, that should not be a problem. He fears the destruction of the imperial citizens’ lives. That means our reasoning can reach him. Or we could take an innocent hostage. Either way, preserving the current regime is important.”

“Does that mean we’ll be ending the plan for me to replace him?” asked Kei as she leaned back in her chair and let her legs dangle down.

“That is a dangerous plan, so I want to avoid it if possible. You are our trump card. Listen carefully about what I tell you to do and do not take any careless actions.”

Kento’s tone was slightly different from before. It sounded like he was worried about Kei and like there was hidden meaning to his words.

Kei returned her chair to normal and sat up.

“Understood. If you say so, that must be the case.”

“That’s right, Kei.”

Kento smiled at her and she seemed to remember something.

“Oh, right. Weren’t we supposed to use our codenames here? You shouldn’t call me Kei, USD. People will think there’s something between us. Even if we’re both guys.”

Kei smiled.

Kento gave an uncertain look.

“You failed to use my codename first, Esper.”

“Really? And I was trying to keep a decent division between my private life and work. Right, Kento?”

Kei gave a suggestive look to Kento.

“Please stop that. People will think there is something between us.”

Kento shook his head, but Kei gave another suggestive look.

“And what’s wrong with that? Also, it’s important for coworkers to get along. Don’t you think The One is prepared to betray us? After all, if he allies with another imperial candidate and that candidate gets ahold of the Jewel Branch of Hourai, using its power would be easy.”

Kei looked across the different members.

Kento cleared his throat and The One spoke up.

“Ha ha ha! Esper, the way you act as if you really can read people’s minds is your one real flaw.”

“But,” began Kei with a smile back. “My special intuition is quite good. I work for Kento and I will do anything for him. Hey, One. No betraying us, okay?”

The One gave an obviously faked shiver.

“There is no place for me except for here. Working to prevent the destruction of mankind is my only choice.”

“Let’s stop talking about that,” cut in Kento. “Either way, mankind is about to experience the greatest threat it has ever faced.”

Chapter 1: Gather, Emperors!

The many wrinkles on an old knight's face grew even deeper in exhaustion.

His name was Yuuki Jouji. He was the Imperial Knights' oldest veteran and one of the oldest people in an age of long lifespans.

But even he had never before seen someone like the person he faced now.

And that person was the empress.

"We all have imperial blood, so how about we just get along? If we eat rice together, we'll get along just fine. Yes, we can just line up and eat. We'll move the chopsticks at the same pace. One, two, one, two. If we mindlessly bring the rice to our mouths, all unpleasant thoughts will leave is."

The current empress was named Soga Keena and what she was saying was too much to even be called naïve.

"Your Majesty."

Jouji refrained from raising his voice and quietly admonished her.

"What is it?"

"Are you suggesting holding a banquet?"

"No, we'll just eat white rice. A banquet normally has a full course meal, right? That won't let us get along."

Keena's eyes sparkled as she explained her delusion.

Jouji cleared his throat.

"You will have the imperial candidates eat white rice? Nothing but white rice?"

"Yeah. Sounds amazing, doesn't it!?"

"This may be presumptuous of me…"

He looked like he was undergoing torture.

"But I doubt eating nothing but white rice will allow you to get along. It might even do the exact opposite."

"Really?" Keena sounded disappointed, but she quickly clapped her hands together in realization. "I know! If we all take a nap together…"

"Your Majesty."

“What is it?”

“This may be extremely presumptuous of me, but are you sure you understand what I am saying?”

“I do. Don’t worry. Because the Jewel Branch of Hourai’s seal has been broken, those with imperial blood are gathering. And the Jewel Branch of Hourai is the key to breaking the seal on an even greater power, so I need to be careful.”

Her explanation was simple, but it did not exactly cover the most important points. However, Jouji himself was not all that knowledgeable about the Jewel Branch of Hourai.

“According to legend, the Jewel Branch of Hourai will choose the true emperor. And the true emperor will revive the Formless Power and guide the people”

This legend had been passed down within the empire.

Legends tended to be created in less advanced societies, but the empire was an exception. Before it had developed a magical society, it had been a scientific society for over a thousand years. In other words, legends were not superstition; they were based in information hidden for some reason and the rumors had developed into legends.

“What’s the Formless Power?”

“A power with no known shape. I believe it merely means it is not known what the power is used for,” explained Jouji.

“Does it matter if we don’t know? I thought the current problem was the people with imperial blood gathering,” asked Keena.

Jouji nodded and displayed a map on a mana screen. The island nation at the center of the empire and a large stretch of territory on the continent were colored red. He pointed at the southern end of that territory and began his explanation in a serious tone.

“While you are an exception, those who have imperial blood have lost some sort of struggle for power in the past. That means most of them will be arriving with revenge in their hearts. For example, we believe there is someone with imperial blood in this region, but that region was sealed off for a good reason.”

A young Imperial Knight suddenly ran into the room.

“Something is happening at Constant Magic Academy!”

“You are in the presence of Her Majesty. Do not burst into the room like that.”

After Jouji’s scolding, the young knight fixed his posture.

“My apologies. Something is happening at Constant Magic Academy. The academy has-…”

He began to explain, but trailed off while still standing at attention.

“What is it? It is rude to end in the middle of a sentence. The current empress may be kind, but your discipline has grown much too lax.”

Jouji began a lecture, but the young knight shook his head.

“My apologies, commander, but…”

“What is it? Stop interrupting me!”

“Yes, but…”

The young knight showed restraint in front of his angry commander, but he managed to point behind the old man.

“Her Majesty has escaped again.”

“What?”

Jouji turned around and found Keena’s clothes lying abandoned on the ground. That of course included her underwear.

“I have worked as an Imperial Knight for over a century and no emperor or empress has been more exhausting.”

Jouji began to weep in anguish, but the young knight gave a troubled shrug and decided to give his report.

“Constant Magic Academy has been overrun by rapidly-growing plants. It is believed to be the magic of the god Aff, but this much power would require a large-scale attack with several spell users controlling the mana.”

Jouji looked taken aback.

“This is the magic of the region I was just talking about!”

He turned to where Keena had been, realized the foolishness of his reflexive action, and turned back to the young knight.

“Um… Okay. Contact the academy right away. This must be an invasion by the Merlai!”

The students of Constant Magic Academy had been driven out of the school buildings, past even the schoolyard, and into the outer territory owned by

the academy. The teachers and students stood idly on the small hill which had held the imperial troops during the war with the demon king.

“This is definitely magic of the god Aff, so it isn’t exactly a mystery,” muttered Torii Mitsuko-sensei.

“Yeah, that magic lets you accelerate the growth of plants,” said Kita Yoshie who usually remained in a lab underneath the school. She lifted up her goggles which were filled with analysis devices and rubbed her eyes. “But I don’t want to imagine how much energy it would take to do it on such a large scale.”

The school building was enveloped in green. No, that did not quite do the situation justice. The school building had fallen into a complete jungle. Tall trees leaned against it and branches and ivy flowed from all of the windows. It looked like some ruins after being abandoned for centuries.

Aff aided his believers in agriculture and the fishery industries. This magic to accelerate the growth of plants was meant to increase the production of food. Plants altered by mana would grow at several times the normal rate by absorbing water and nutrients from the ground.

But the faster the growth and the more plants being used, the harder it was to control the mana. And this incident was a little too large-scale. It went beyond difficult and reached a level almost impossible for a human.

“Is this being done by multiple people? But there were no signs of anyone infiltrating the area.”

Mitsuko-sensei crossed her arms.

“If one person is doing this, their power must rival the demon king’s,” said Yoshie as she turned toward Sai Akuto.

When Akuto noticed, he shrugged.

“Don’t ask me. All I know is this probably won’t be settled peaceably.”

The other students began to focus on him too.

This was to be expected. Most of the recent trouble in the school had been related to him. And this incident was much more bizarre than most. The academy had fallen into a jungle overnight.

Akuto did not know what was going on either, but he too suspected it was somehow related to him. Not only did he suspect it, he had resigned himself to the fact that it probably was. He had grown so accustomed to these commotions that he had learned passively letting things happen was less stressful than insisting he had nothing to do with it and regretting it later.

“I’ll go look into it. I’m sure it’s dangerous inside.”

A normal person would have hesitated, but he started toward the school building as easily as taking a stroll.

“He does not sense any danger to himself even in a situation as strange as this. How reliable,” said Etou Fujiko as if in a trance.

Even for someone as devoted as her, this was putting it too kindly. And Hattori Junko could not help but point that out.

“I am not sure reliable is the right word. It is more like he lives in an entirely different world from us. No normal person could walk calmly into such a strange place.”

But Fujiko gave a scornful laugh.

“Heh. Then why not leave him forever. If you cannot keep up with him, you should not have confessed your love to him.”

“Wha-…?”

Junko had previously ended up confessing to Akuto in the Sasahara inn and she had even received a much too straightforward answer. Just remembering it made her want to scream and run away.

“B-but he said he loved all of us, so it did not have any real meaning…”

She grew flustered, so Fujiko became triumphant.

“Honestly, you are hopeless. We must all do the best we can to be his women.”

“H-his women!?”

“Heh. Are you that oblivious? And you have no use other than in a straight fight, so it is your duty to go with him at times like this.”

That made Junko begin seriously worrying.

“Uuh… Y-you might be right. But right now, I think I would only get in his way. I cannot allow that. I need to get stronger.”

Mitsuko-sensei then clapped her hands and interrupted.

“Okay, okay. Enough silliness. Only Sai-kun needs to go. Unlike before, this is trouble at school, so you have to do what I tell you. This is dangerous, so only he will be going. The rest of you can give him advice after he gives a report on the situation.”

She then turned to Yoshie.

“That’s what we’ve decided. Can you hear me, Akuto-kun?”

With a sidelong glance at Mitsuko-sensei, Yoshie telepathically contacted Akuto.

<I can hear you. There doesn't seem to be any kind of jamming.>

Akuto telepathically replied after having travelled a fair bit already.

"Ah, no fair! I should have been the one to contact him!"

Fujiko leaned on Yoshie's back and tried to cut into the conversation by pressing her face against the goggles. Yoshie almost fell forward, but she managed to stand her ground.

"Mghh… If you want to contact him, use your student handbook. And he should be able to pick up multiple conversations without a specialized device."

"Oh, you're right. Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko moved away and began her own telepathic conversation, but this time someone leaned up against her to cut in.

"Mgyah!"

She groaned as Korone leaned limply against her.

"I have information from the palace. It seems related to this incident," she sent to Akuto.

"Y-you're too heavy…"

"It is about a tribe known as the Merlai." Korone continued calmly while ignoring Fujiko's complaints. "The Merlai have a strange history. They live in a deep jungle on an island to the south. It is part of the empire, but its existence is kept secret and the area is known as unexplored. And it seems the first tribe leader had imperial blood."

"What? I've never heard of that," said Yoshie.

"What kind of nonsense is this?"

Fujiko was half protesting and half surprised while Korone needlessly leaned against her.

"And most surprisingly of all, it was originally a theme park."

<And most surprisingly of all, it was originally a theme park.>

Korone's voice filled Akuto's head as he approached the school building.

He could no longer continue without treading on underbrush and other plants. This had originally been the area in front of the dining hall, but it now looked like an unexplored jungle.

“A theme park?” he asked.

Korone continued her explanation.

<Yes. During the early days of the empire, a project began to turn that southern island until a theme park, but the project was never completed. Why is unknown, but there must be some great secret as the reason is being hidden.>

“Hidden? So no data remains?”

<Correct. This information comes from the memories of a veteran Imperial Knight who knows a lot about the imperial family. That means this great secret must be a connection between the theme park and someone in the imperial family.>

“But it’s just a theme park.”

<This would mean it is not just a theme park. The rumor is that a member of the imperial family grew so hooked on the jungle theme park that he never returned. He named himself the leader of the Merlai tribe and began living like a true savage.>

“That just sounds like a joke to me.”

Akuto looked around and realized that story had filled the jungle scene around him with a sense of madness.

<It was probably not until a situation like this occurred that it became clear it was more than just a theme park. Please be careful. Who knows what lurks in that jungle.>

“I know that, but there’s not much I can do,” he muttered.

—*Can someone really take a theme park that seriously?*

That bothered him. Based on the situation, it seemed this was caused by those calling themselves the Merlai, but that would require believing that rumor.

—*But if that isn’t what’s happening, why is this happening?*

He parted some branches, found the school building’s entrance, and entered. He decided to head toward the highest point. If this was manmade, the highest point or the central point would be the most important. Humans could not relax otherwise.

The building's floor had been broken in places by trees growing up, which spoke volumes about how powerful these trees were.

He checked around and climbed the stairs. On his way to the top floor, he saw no signs of someone altering the surrounding plants. That would mean the no one entered the area after the trees had grown in.

"With this floor, I'll have checked the entire building."

The top floor lounge had a glass ceiling. With the green jungle filling it, it looked like a greenhouse at a botanical garden. The air was filled with warmth and calming aromas. The morning sun shone in at an angle, but the thick layer of leaves blocked it out just enough to create a soothing curtain of light on the floor. If one ignored how the plants had appeared, it seemed perfect for sitting around with a cold drink.

But the voice Akuto heard as soon as he set foot in the lounge was enough to return the tension to his loosening cheeks.

"Are you strong?" asked a high-pitched voice.

"Who are you?"

He spoke toward the center of the lounge because he was unsure where the voice had come from.

"I'm asking the questions here. …But it looks like I don't need to. You are strong."

The voice echoed throughout the entire lounge, making it unclear where it was coming from.

—*Why can't I sense their mana?*

He searched for a presence, but he only sensed a static-like mana wave from every direction. It seemed the trees filling the lounge gave off a certain mana wave that was very similar to the speaker's mana waves.

—*It's like they've become one with the trees.*

That seemed to be why the person had filled the area with trees.

As Akuto took a defensive stance, the voice called out again.

"The Jewel Branch of Hourai called me here! You aren't the empress. I, Nonimora, have business with the empress! Call her here!"

It seemed this person was named Nonimora. Based on what she was saying, it seemed she was exactly who they had predicted she was. Akuto had a bad feeling that she was the type who really did believe a theme park was real.

“The empress is not here. If you wish to negotiate, you must go through the proper procedures.”

He wanted to see how she would react to this.

He received response, but it was not what he had expected.

“You are the ones who aren’t going through the proper procedures! The Jewel Branch of Hourai will choose the true emperor! The different imperial candidates must compete to see who comes out on top!”

—*Do they know what they’re doing here?*

Her response had been unexpected, but his words were getting through to her.

“When you say ‘compete’, do you mean fight?”

“This is the problem with the people of the main island! Stop being so brutal! We compete in order to reach mutual approval. It doesn’t matter if its zutan-zutan or mosa-mosa!”

“Z-zutan-zutan?”

Akuto was confused, but he received an immediate reply.

“Zutan-zutan is zutan-zutan. What’s so hard to understand?”

“Well… All of it?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t know what mosa-mosa is either.”

“Does it have to do with a hairy person?”

“Why in the world would it!? Fine! We can go with totechite-tetechite.”

“I’m not sure what that is either. And what do I have to do with this competition?”

“Oh, you’re right. Then go bring the empress here.”

“The people of this country didn’t even know the Jewel Branch of Hourai existed, so I’m not sure what to think of your claim. It would help if you spoke with the palace first.”

Akuto spoke the whole truth.

He felt he could trust this person a bit. Or rather, her tone of voice and comments showed she liked to keep things straight and to the point.

But that side of her turned out to be even greater than he thought.

“That’s too much effort! You have a connection to the empress, don’t you? I sense powerful mana. More powerful than a normal person.”

“Well, I suppose I do have a connection…”

“Out with it! No one but the empress could be as powerful as you! Tell me this: is the empress even more powerful than you?”

“Well…” He pictured Keena’s face in his mind. “I’m certainly no match for her.”

“Amazing!”

Nonimora’s tone grew cheerful and lively.

“Then let’s do totechite-totechite!”

“What exactly is totechite-totechite?”

“It’s totechite-totechite. The rules say you can run wherever you want and whoever touches the other with both hands first wins!”

Nonimora’s last word flew through the air and her body likely did as well.

Akuto sensed a presence behind him, so he jumped forward. A broken tree branch landed in the spot he had been in.

—*Hm?*

He sensed something and leaped to the right. He felt a wind to the left and someone ran right past him.

“Ohhhh! You avoided me!”

She sounded delighted that he had avoided her.

Akuto looked over, but she was already gone.

“You sure are fast.”

He searched for her presence again, but he could only detect the same waves all around him. The only motion he could find was the rustling of the leaves.

—*!*

He felt wind and leaped without even looking. He saw a brown shadow pass by out of the corner of his eye.

“You avoided me again!” she delightedly shouted once more.

—*Um… What am I doing?*

The situation confused him. He tried to establish a telepathic connection, but failed. There was no jamming, but the mana waves emitted by the trees created too much static.

—*I just have to grab them, right?*

After reaching that conclusion, he spoke up without knowing where she was.

“Can I use magic?”

“Go right ahead!” replied Nonimora.

“In that case…”

Without worrying about her movements, he casually swung his arms apart. The movement whipped up an intense current of mana.

“Ohhhh?” cried Nonimora in surprise.

A spiraling torrent of mana appeared around Akuto. The trees began to bend and creak. They seemed to have flexible trunks, but this was still bringing them to their limits. A few seconds after the wind began, they twisted and fell over. After the cracking noises settled down, the wind grew still and the floor was covered in a spiral of felled trees. It looked like the site where a group of giants had an exciting folk dance.

“Oh, my!”

A small child stood amid it all.

Even from a distance, her brown skin and large clear eyes were noticeable. Her appearance surpassed gender and reached a position that anyone would view favorably. She was childish and could be seen as either a boy or a girl.

She wore rough clothes. They were made of wonderfully decorated leather and covered in large jewels, so her outfit looked both simple and noble.

Akuto looked at her suspiciously and shook his head.

“Will you stop now?”

But she shook her arms in anger.

“No! I need to punish you for not taking care of nature!”

Akuto frowned.

“Nature? You used magic to make all this grow here overnight. How is that natural?”

“Ohhhhh! You piss me off! You main islanders are always like this! You always make fun of our desire to protect nature!”

Nonimora began exaggeratedly stomping on the floor.

That direct representation of her anger amused Akuto, but he could not accept what she was saying.

“These plants were altered with mana and you were controlling their growth. You can’t call that natural.”

“Why must you make fun of me like that!? You stupid main islanders! How much do you even know about us Merlai!?”

“Rumor has it you believed a theme park was a real jungle and started living there.”

“That’s fine and all, but we don’t believe it’s real. We know the trees are the same as what you call buildings!”

“Eh? Then why?”

Akuto had not expected that answer. In the empire, magic was just a social system yet it had been turned into a religion. Only the priests and certain intellectuals used it while aware it was a system. Even though all the information was publicly available, the normal people fully accepted the religious dogma in their lives. Were the Merlai doing the same thing?

“Are you saying only the leaders like you know the truth and are deceiving the normal peole?”

“Mkiii! Don’t make fun of us! Everyone knows! Kids learn about history in school!”

“Then…what do you mean?”

“Science and everyday life are two different things. Living like an animal is for the best. You have all the food you need, you don’t get sick, and you live convenient lives, but you don’t think you’re happy. That’s because you aren’t having fun with life. That’s why the Merlai got rid of all those precepts. The theme park was just an opportunity for that.”

“Really?”

Akuto was dumbfounded. He was surprisingly shocked. The empire was vast and it constituted the entire world to him, so this was the first time he had felt like he was contacting something foreign. Also, Nonimora was unexpectedly intellectual and her way of thinking was similar to his own which this country treated as heretical.

“Do you get it now?”

Nonimora bent her small body back to puff out her chest.

Akuto smiled and nodded.

“It does seem I was mistaken and I apologize for that. After speaking with you, I would like to know a bit more about where you live.”

When she saw the look on his face, her already large eyes opened even wider.

“Ohh, so you understand!? Then let’s continue the totechite-totechite!”

“Fine, but you won’t get anything from defeating me.”

Despite his warning, she gave a deep nod.

“Not a problem. I just think it’s fun!”

She prepared to continue, but then a voice reached them from above.

“A-chan!”

She was invisible, but Keena was definitely descending from the sky. Akuto looked up and his coat was swiped from behind.

Before he could try to put it on her, Keena wrapped his coat over her shoulders and appeared.

“If you’re just going to make your presence known, why even strip in the first place?” he asked in exasperation.

Keena puffed out her cheeks.

“If I don’t, I can’t escape the palace.”

“The palace!?” Nonimora reacted to their conversation. “Does that mean you’re the empress?”

She seemed to have oddly good instincts because she quickly caught on that Keena was the empress. Most people would have assumed otherwise upon seeing her.

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

Keena looked puzzled.

Akuto wondered if he could have done a better job of hiding Keena’s identity, but he realized that was near hopeless with those two involved.

“We were just talking about that. This is Nonimora of the Merlai who is apparently an imperial candidate.”

“I see.”

Keena looked at Nonimora and Nonimora stared back with her eyes opened wide.

“Amazing! That’s the empress for you! She’s naked!”

—*Why is she focusing on that?*

Akuto almost fell to the ground.

But Nonimora paid him no heed and continued speaking excitedly.

“The empress is going around naked to tell the people to return to nature, isn’t she!? That’s amazing!”

—*At least it looks like we can talk peacefully about this.*

Akuto was still shocked, but he breathed a sigh of relief.

But as a smile covered Nonimora’s face, she ran straight toward Keena.

“Then let’s continue totechite-totechite! This time the empress is my opponent!”

She had said the first to touch the other with both hands won and magic was permissible. In a space with nowhere to hide, those rules essentially meant magical combat. And as Akuto expected, Nonimora instantly fired mana spheres at Keena from four different directions while running forward. She likely planned to grab Keena while she dealt with those attacks.

“Kyah!” screamed Keena.

Akuto immediately circled in front of her and destroyed all the mana spheres with a single motion. He also blocked Nonimora herself with a mana shield.

“Ohhh?”

She tried to oppose his shield and advance, but she could not manage it. She quickly spun around, jumped, and fixed her stance.

—*I couldn’t hold back because I acted on reflex. I may have overdone it.*

But Nonimora was laughing loudly.

“Ohohhh! Nice! Amazing! You’re even stronger than before!”

“I’m glad. Now please listen. The empress is not suited for this kind of competition. I may be, but there is no reason to continue.”

Nonimora looked disappointed, but she obediently relaxed her battle pose.

“Oh, that’s no fun. I like to move around a lot.”

“At any rate, the empress doesn’t understand the situation, so could you explain it? I also have some questions.”

Akuto went on to tell Keena what he had been told. Nonimora chimed in a few times to add some information, but she provided nothing new about choosing a new emperor.

“In other words, one of the people the Jewel Branch of Hourai reacted to has to become emperor?” asked Keena.

“Yes. They say the Jewel Branch of Hourai will decide who, but it’s just a tool. I assume whoever uses it will become emperor. That means the emperor has to be chosen before that,” agreed Nonimora

“In that case, I don’t have to be empress,” said Keena as if it were nothing.

“Eh?”

Nonimora stared at her in surprise.

“Like I said, I don’t have to be empress.”

“Wait a second. You can’t set aside being empress like that. Of course, if you insist on doing so, I’ll take the title from you, but…”

She was clearly confused, but she folded her arms while looking oddly nervous.

“Didn’t you come here to get the imperial throne?” asked Akuto curiously.

Based on the situation, he had assumed Nonimora would act like an invader.

“The Merlai don’t desire things in that way. The issue is what the emperor or empress does with that position. And I have…no, the Merlai have a duty they must fulfill,” she said.

“A duty?” asked Akuto.

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, but she finally nodded and spoke.

“That’s right. The Merlai protect the Formless Power.”

“Oh, that old knight mentioned that. I didn’t really understand, but he said it’s really strong.”

Nonimora shook her head.

“That’s not what I was told. The people can use the Jewel Branch of Hourai to plunge into the Formless Power using the ship that travels to the star which has been set in motion. The Formless Power grants good power only to those with a good heart. Otherwise, the Formless Power will eventually destroy their entire species.”

“Is that…a legend?”

Nonimora shook her head again.

“Those are the words of the first tribe leader, so it isn’t a legend. We also have the ship that goes to the star.”

“But…going to a star?”

“Yes. Research into travelling beyond the moon…no, research into travelling beyond the planets circling the sun was stopped. No one thinks about going into space anymore. There is probably some kind of wall if you travel through space far enough. And if you go that far, you can touch it. That is how we view it.”

Nonimora’s explanation matched with Akuto’s worldview. And Yamato Bouichirou had mentioned an invasion from outside the universe, so it was possible there was something beyond that wall.

“I don’t know what you mean by a good heart, but we might be able to help you with that.”

Akuto turned toward Keena, but she held a finger to her cheek with a blank look on her face.

“But if that’s the case, why don’t I just give up my position as empress?”

“I hate people who don’t live up to their great duty,” said Nonimora. “You have the Imperial Regalia, so you are the empress.”

“Yes, but I didn’t want to become empress.”

“Is that so?” Nonimora stood before Keena and put her hands on her hips. “Then I can take the position from you and I’ll take a nice bonus along with it.”

“A nice bonus?”

Keena tilted her head.

“Him.” Nonimora pointed at Akuto. “When he protected you just now, I could tell you’re suppressing his power with the Imperial Regalia.”

“Ah!” cried Keena upon realizing what Nonimora meant.

If she gave up the Imperial Regalia, she was giving up her relationship with Akuto as the demon king.

“I can’t let that happen. You can’t have my position!”

She shook her head and Nonimora looked disappointed.

“Oh, I see. And after I’d taken a liking to him. I wanted to have him by my side. But the Merlai know humans aren’t possessions, so how about this? I don’t need the imperial throne, but I’ll have him help me protect the Formless Power. And he has free will, so you and I can have a hem-hem competition and let him decide the winner.”

She clapped her hands together as if to declare it was a good idea.

“Hem-hem?”

Both Keena and Akuto looked puzzled.

Nonimora’s mouth opened in surprise.

“You don’t know about hem-hem? But it’s instinctual for humans. You’re naked, so I assumed you’d know.”

“Eh? But I don’t,” said Keena. “You use weird words, Nonimora-chan.”

“Fine then.” Nonimora raised a finger. “Hem-hem is when a guy puts his ryun-ryun in a girl’s pakk-pakk to make a child.”

“Bh!”

“Eh?”

Akuto spat out the saliva in his mouth and Keena fell silent and grew bright red.

Nonimora looked back and forth between them with a puzzled look.

“Why are you reacting like that? It’s a natural thing. It’s the best way for two girls to compete for a guy they like. And if you like both of us, the three of us can do it together.”

Akuto understood that was how it worked from a purely natural perspective, but…

“Wait a second. Nonimora, are you a girl?”

“Yes. How rude. Now, time for hem-hem. I’ll do my best!”

Nonimora swung her arms around to pump herself up.

“No, wait a minute!”

Akuto frantically waved his hands back and forth.

“What is your problem? There’s nothing wrong with trying it out,” said Nonimora as if it were not a big deal. “Unlike in ancient times, you can’t get any diseases and there’s magic to make sure you don’t have a child.”

“Th-that isn’t the issue.”

Akuto shook his head while Keena clung to his arm and looked at Nonimora with hostility in her eyes.

“A-chan doesn’t do that kind of thing!”

But that hostile glare did not faze her.

“It isn’t right to keep a guy to yourself! You can be his favorite, but you should lend him out at least once a week!”

—*Her sense of values is just too different.*

Just as Akuto tried to figure out what to say, help arrived.

“Stop right there, you filthy-mouthed child! Akuto-sama is mine!”

Fujiko’s comments were usually a bother, but they were welcome here.

They must have been monitoring the situation because Yoshie and the others entered behind Fujiko.

“That’s a lot of girls! So your name is Akuto, is it? You sure are popular. If you have hem-hem with me once…no, twice a month, I think you’ll really start to like me.”

Akuto assumed Fujiko would grow hostile, but after a bit of thought, she nodded as if to say it was not a bad idea.

“Yes… That’s an excellent idea! Akuto-sama is a kind person, so he would want to make love to his women in a rotation at first. But he would begin visiting a certain one more and more frequently! That’s perfect. Eventually, I would take four…no, five days a week. One day could be left to some worthless girl out of pity or obligation and the last day would be for him to rest.”

“That won’t happen as long as I’m around!” declared Nonimora. “I’m way better at hem-hem!”

“Your puny body can’t use any kind of techniques! But my abundant body can do all sorts of things!”

Fujiko began touching her body to show it off, but Nonimora refused to lose.

“I’m really good at suppo-suppo! I can send even a demonic beast to heaven!”

“Please, enough of this…”

Akuto tried to stop them, but someone else’s comment topped the others.

“I am willing to let him ravish me in ways simply impossible for a human.”

That ridiculous statement of course came from Korone.

“Could you not make the situation even more complicated?”

As Akuto turned toward her, she continued to speak with a serious expression.

“It is worth thinking about what Nonimora-san said. I am sure they will respect your will, but the government has decided to take action.”

“As long as this doesn’t get dangerous, I can only go along with their decision.”

Despite what he said, Akuto could not deny that he had a bad feeling about what was to come.

A few days after Nonimora’s arrival, the government announced they were putting together an expedition containing the empress, Akuto, and the Imperial Knights. While Akuto and the others were overwhelmed with

preparations, it did not seem the academy students had much to do. But then Student Council President Lily Shiraishi ordered some of them to take part in a certain task.

“A large amount of secret funds are being used, so some large-scale magical operation must be underway somewhere. Why can’t you understand something so simple?”

Lily had gathered Fujiko, Yoshie, Junko, and Hiroshi in the student council room and she was lecturing Hiroshi as he stood in front of her desk.

He looked apologetic, but he still pouted his lips a bit and argued his case.

“I’m the only one here who was raised in a normal household.”

He was the son of the family which had for some reason been given the Brave suit, but he had not been born to a high-level priest’s family like the others gathered there. He had been told to investigate CIMO 8’s activities and they did not know what went on inside all of the religions.

“But you are the only one who can boldly take illegal actions. And we can’t contact you telepathically while you do so, so you have to act on your own judgment.”

Lily acted like a teacher and Hiroshi felt like he was being unreasonably bullied.

“But just because the secretariat’s secret funds are being used doesn’t tell us where they’re being used. We may know that CIMO 8 has been very busy and that the guy named USD is plotting something, but where am I supposed to investigate?”

“I just explained that. The Diet members with ties to the religions are meeting in secret with corrupt priests, so sneak into one of those meetings and gather some information.”

“But I don’t know who those corrupt priests or dangerous Diet members are.”

“I gave you a list.”

“There are too many!”

“It’s up to you to figure out who is likely to act when. And the timing will change what information you find.”

“And I’m saying I don’t know how to do that!”

“Oh… Well, I see.”

Lily folded her arms.

“But…” Yoshie spoke up to help. “It would be impossible for Miwa-kun to investigate too deeply. After all, it seems that USD guy acquired some of the Brave suit’s secrets from Yamato Bouichirou.”

“But he hasn’t done anything about him. If all goes well, he might even be able to meet with this USD. Then he can directly ask him what he’s doing.”

Lily smiled thinly as she spoke.

Hiroshi mentally paled as he realized how dangerous a situation he was being forced into.

“But USD isn’t showing up. For one thing, USD is extremely rich. Would he really so blatantly use public money if he wants to keep this a secret?”

“I understand your point, but this began once that small Merlai girl arrived and it is not unnatural for him to use public money for his work,” said Fujiko.

“Yes, but it’s a lot of money just to investigate the Merlai. Also, we know they aren’t actually investigating it. We have all of the Imperial Knights’ information thanks to Keena.”

Fujiko was forced to agree with Yoshie’s explanation.

“You’re right. But if it is really that great a sum being spent, it may be difficult to think of it simply as USD’s conspiracy.”

“These days, money is only needed for transfers that use energy on a large scale and magical experiments that make use of those transfers. There are of course exceptions like Sai Akuto that ignore that and waste a lot of energy. At any rate, what could they be doing?”

Lily brought her hands together on the desk.

“What if CIMO 8 is breaking apart?” suggested Junko.

Everyone turned toward her.

She waved her hands embarrassedly at the unexpected attention.

“Um, the Suhara followers were not all united, so I thought maybe the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office does not get along either. Especially since they lost Yamato Bouichirou.”

“It’s possible. In that case, we were thinking about this all wrong. We could try tracking down a member other than USD.”

Lily turned toward Hiroshi.

He jumped like a napping student who was suddenly asked for an answer.

“I had a feeling it would come to this…”

“Don’t say that. I’ll give you a starting point. Here’s a list of the important people.”

Lily displayed a list of names on a mana screen and slid it toward him.

Once he took it, his eyebrows twitched.

The list was quite large.

“Wait a minute…”

“It has to be a large list. These are the people seen entering or leaving the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office but aren’t staff members. There are some contractors who go in and out, which is perfect for camouflage.”

“Now I won’t have time to go on dates…”

“Sounds like you’ve been enjoying yourself. But you shouldn’t say that kind of thing when her sister’s sitting right behind you.”

Lily used her chin to indicate behind him.

It had completely slipped his mind. He was currently dating the idol named Hoshino Yuri, but her real name was Hattori Yuuko and she was Hattori Junko’s younger sister.

“If you cause any problems for Yuuko’s job, I will personally hunt you down.”

Hiroshi heard a sword lift partly from its scabbard. Without turning around, he stiffly began walking.

“I-I will start that investigation.”

“Thanks for your cooperation.”

Lily waved a hand to see him off.

It was not that Hiroshi had been slow to act. The situation had simply proceeded more quickly than expected.

A dog and a bewitchingly beautiful boy were looking at a ship from a distance. It was a large ship that flew through the sky and it was custom made to be especially luxurious.

“The empress’s private ship. I wish I could ride on it,” said the bewitchingly beautiful boy whose CIMO 8 codename was Esper and whose name was Kei.

“The standards of comfort are different for a dog, so I have little interest in it,” said the hairy dog whose codename was The One.

The empress's private ship was located in the palace's yard and the two of them were viewing it from a building in the center of the imperial capital. Parts of the yard were hidden by trees, but the ship was large enough to be seen. The white ship had a simple streamlined design and its surface glittered as it reflected the sun, but detailed patterns were carved deep in the smooth reflective surface. The color and shape of those patterns seemed to change depending on the angle they were viewed from, so the ship had a fantastical beauty to it.

"That and two Imperial Knight guard ships will be travelling to the Merlai village, right?"

"Yes. And Morlock is already inside."

The horizontal opening of The One's dog mouth opened and closed as he spoke.

"I'm so jealous. It must be wonderful on there."

Kei clasped his hands behind his head, but his words contained no emotion.

"He does not have a normal human body either, so his standards of comfort must be different as well."

The One looked up at Kei, but no one could tell what expression his dog face contained. But when he spoke to Kei, he kept his voice low as if speaking a secret.

"By the way, you really scared me back there. I didn't expect you to announce our betrayal, even if it was jokingly. Surely you aren't going to say you won't betray USD."

"That was just a tasteful joke. And USD's already discovered your betrayal, so it doesn't matter."

Kei also kept his voice low as he responded, but it was only his tone of voice he kept subdued. He had a bewitching smile on his lips that did not look like it belonged on a boy's face

"But even if he's caught on to your betrayal, he'd never think I would betray him. Then again, you could call betrayal another form of love. Just kidding."

Kei grinned and The One trembled.

"As an alien, I have grown quite skilled at reading a human's thoughts from their behavior, but I can never tell what you're thinking. I thought you had agreed to modify your body for USD's sake. After all, the project to strengthen you was his idea."

"Hey, do you think Kento loves me?"

Kei's tone suddenly grew serious and The One nodded.

"It seems so. And it would be a problem if he doesn't. He needs to believe that you haven't betrayed him."

"Heh heh… I see. That's a relief."

Kei stretched and gave a smile of pure enjoyment.

"Then I'll go meet with Kento. He wants to discuss some stuff with me. He thinks another imperial candidate is going to arrive in addition to the Merlai."

"A private meeting between two males?"

"Even aliens are prejudiced about that? Well, whatever. There's something I want to do, so I'm doing it."

Kei waved and parted with The One.

Once Kei disappeared from view, The One gave a cruel expression that was recognizable even on a dog face.

"A human mind I cannot understand, hm? But there is nothing more logically constructed than a mind. They obey their desires and give in to threats."

No human was there to see the look on The One's face.

"A-chan, this is amazing! This is what you call an all-expenses paid vacation!"

"This isn't a vacation."

Keena and Akuto boarded her personal ship. She simply rejoiced, but he was checking for any oddities or people hiding on the ship. She had released a certain percentage of his power, so he would not overlook even the slightest mana abnormality. In addition, he could read the life logs of the Imperial Knights via the gods. He could see their career histories and even their personal secrets.

—There's no sign of anyone disguising themselves and coming aboard. I feel bad about doing this to the knights, though.

He silently apologized. He knew this was necessary, but it still made him feel guilty.

"Nothing is out of the ordinary," added Korone as she walked up behind him.

"Then it's time to have fun!"

Keena hung from Akuto's arm with a smile covering her face and Nonimora hung from the opposite arm.

"Don't forget me. This trip would be meaningless without me!"

They were all quite noisy, but those four were the group taking the ship to the Merlai village. The Imperial Knights would ride the other two ships. Keena had selfishly requested that not even a few of the knights stayed on her ship. Then again, the lack of any knights made it easier for Akuto to act if something did happen, so he had no reason to object.

"Allow me to explain our flight plan. We will travel south from the capital. Our destination is located here on the map."

Korone displayed a map on a mana screen.

"The Merlai village is located in the center of this island. It is quite large for a village and it contains as much land as the area within the capital's belt line."

"It must have been a large theme park," said Akuto.

The inside of the ship was quite comfortable and the carpeted cabins were just as large and nicely furnished as a top-class apartment. Akuto sat on the circular sofa in the center of the cabin while he listened to Korone's explanation. Nonimora and Keena were leaning against him, but he was holding them off as if playing with a dog.

"It was. However, the island is also quite large and most of it is covered in jungle. It is made from trees that absorb mana, so the village was difficult to detect from the imperial mainland. And they were of course intentionally planted for that reason," explained Korone.

"But Nonimora says people from her village have visited the imperial mainland and they have a magical culture, so they must be under the empire's influence," said Akuto.

It was Nonimora who answered.

"That's right. The Merlai follow the god Aff, but we can restrict what information we give by receiving the benefits of following a god but not returning a log. And that's because we can use a portion of the Formless Power."

Nonimora spoke casually, but this was another shocking statement for Akuto.

"So all this time there have been people personifying the ideals of the black magicians on a small scale?"

“It seems so, but only because of this Formless Power.” Korone had heard this explanation before, so she explained the situation to him. “But it is not known to what the term ‘Formless Power’ refers or what its effects are. However, we have seen a similar power.”

Korone glanced over at Keena.

She was hesitant to directly state in in front of Nonimora, but Akuto understood what she meant. He recalled the moment when Keena had altered everyone’s memories.

“I feel like everything is connected.”

He looked at Keena as well. She had been toying with his arm, but now she looked up in surprise and averted her gaze.

“Anyway, we will maintain a decent altitude over the jungle and descend into the village. The empress is making this journey on the invitation of her apparent relative, Nonimora Kananoni-sama. And as Nonimora-sama has suggested, we will be investigating the power of the Jewel Branch of Hourai. The Imperial Knights will be sending an investigation team along with us, so please keep that in mind.”

Korone finished her explanation. Akuto had already heard all this countless times from the old knight named Yuuki Jouji.

“Understood,” he said. “Let’s do our part in this.”

Korone headed toward the cockpit because she would be piloting it on her own.

After she left, Nonimora grew a bit livelier.

“Okay, let’s get down to the hem-hem.”

“No, you promised not to do it on the ship. …Not that we’ll be doing it elsewhere either.”

Akuto peeled the girl off of him. She looked displeased, so he decided to make her a drink.

“Look, there’s a bar over there, so I can get you a drink. Is there anything you’d like? Nothing alcoholic.”

But as he stood up, someone tugged on his arm. It was Keena.

“What is it?” he asked.

She fidgeted as if she wanted to say something and she repeatedly tugged on his sleeve.

“Again: what is it?”

Only after he asked a second time did she speak very quietly.

“Hey… Would you like it if I did it too?”

“Eh?”

He was not sure what she meant, so he moved his face in closer and asked her again.

She blushed and spoke again.

“If you want, we could do it…”

“Do what?”

“Hem-hem…”

She was looking him directly in the eye, so she did not appear to be joking.

“Um… Well… Are you sure you know what that means?” he asked seriously while moving away from her.

“A-chaaan!”

She grabbed onto his sleeve, but he rather forcibly pulled his arm away and headed for the bar.

“Ha ha… Okay, what would you like, Keena?”

Nonimora rejoiced when she saw how he was acting and she threw her small self onto the sofa.

“Oh? Oh? Oh? Has my charm won you over? Is that it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

He was not sure what to say, so he made three random drinks and changed to subject in an attempt to get some serious information out of Nonimora.

“More importantly, does the Jewel Branch of Hourai itself have any power?”

The wooden box containing the Jewel Branch of Hourai was placed on the table. Sasahara Nozomi’s family had been protecting it for generations.

That question put a serious expression on Nonimora’s face.

“It is said that the first test subject for the mana culture was the emperor and that emperor was my ancestor. The Jewel Branch of Hourai informs those with strong imperial blood that the imperial selection has begun. It was probably made for that purpose.”

“Then why was it passed down by the Sasahara family?”

“That was a cowardly act. Those in the imperial capital were ensuring that the imperial throne would remain in their own line.”

“I see. So that’s it. It was a complication of history.”

Akuto returned to the sofa and lined the drinks up on the table. He then felt a soft sensation wrap around his left arm.

Keena was clinging to his arm once more.

“What is it?” he asked.

She did not answer and started rubbing against his arm.

“Rub rub…”

She rubbed her cheek against his upper arm, pressed her chest against his forearm, and began swaying her entire body back and forth like a cat.

“C’mon, stop that.”

He tore her off of his arm.

She gave a groan that seemed half displeasure and half confusion.

“You’re acting a little weird today,” he said.

She did not reply and simply looked irritated.

“Ohhh! That looks like fun! I think I’ll rub against you too while continuing this serious discussion!”

Nonimora grabbed onto his right arm and started doing what Keena had done, but when she spoke, it was the same serious topic as before. It was weird.

“It’s said a few imperial candidates – that is, the original emperor’s descendants – scattered around the world, but the descendants of the primary successor at the time continually betrayed the other candidates after becoming emperor.”

As Nonimora spoke, Keena started rubbing against Akuto’s arm again. He could no longer shake them off.

“And you said the Jewel Branch of Hourai is also the key to activating a ship to a star,” added Akuto.

“That’s right.” Nonimora nodded. “The ship to the star flew into space once before and it brought back a portion of the Formless Power. That is why I can use a portion of it. That is what that L’Isle-Adam was saying.”

“Then what is that power?”

At that point, Korone returned to the cabin. A fair bit of time had passed since they had left. Akuto thought they might have already arrived, but it turned out he was wrong.

“I apologize for interrupting, but I have a report.”

“What is it?”

“The ship is crashing.”

“What?”

“It is crashing. I have lost control.”

She gave the report so calmly that it sounded unimportant, but it was clearly an emergency.

“W-wait. How did this happen? Were we attacked?”

“No. If anything, we were the ones to attack. I do not know why, but the ship’s control system has been taken over from the inside. Its self-defense weapons shot down the two Imperial Knight ships.”

“It was taken over from the inside? Impossible. There’s no one onboard but us.”

“That is the mystery. However, we must accept reality and act accordingly. As such, we must prepare to evacuate. This may be a wonderfully comfortable ship, but it is crashing as we speak.”

“…U-understood.”

Akuto stood up and ran to retrieve his school bag. Fortunately, Akuto and Keena’s luggage was gathered in a large bag and they had not opened it yet.

“Eh? It’s crashing? Really? But it’s been so quiet,” said Keena.

Korone nodded.

“Unfortunately, it is true. In the name of comfort, the ship’s soundproofing and attitude control are perfect.”

Korone forced open the cabin door and wind rushed in. Akuto walked over to the door and saw a green carpet of jungle below. It was oddly close by and he could tell they were gradually lowering while the ship remained perfectly horizontal.

“We have already arrived at the island,” explained Korone. “We will merely crash in the jungle surrounding the village.”

Akuto looked back toward Keena and Nonimora. Neither of them looked particularly worried. Nonimora even appeared to be thoroughly enjoying

the situation. Then again, Keena could fly and Nonimora probably had no worries about this kind of thing.

“But please be careful. The jungle is filled with plants that absorb mana. Mana will not be stable except at high altitudes.”

By the time Korone said that, they had already jumped out of the ship.

“Oh, that’s right…”

“Eh? Then I can’t fly? …I really can’t! Kyaaaah!”

“Ah ha ha. Don’t be so scared! If you find a tall tree and fall while jumping from leaf to leaf, you’ll be just fine!”

Nonimora laughed.

—*That’s asking a bit much, but I guess we have no other choice.*

As he fell, Akuto held Keena close.

He looked up and saw Korone jump out with a parachute on her back.

Chapter 2: A True Hero

“We’ve lost track of the empress’s ship?” repeated Lily.

That classified information had been brought to her by Junko.

The two of them were facing each other on either side of the student council room’s desk.

“It only just happened,” whispered Junko. “This is naturally top secret, so do not tell anyone else.”

“Who did it?”

Lily’s expression was halfway between confusion and rage. She seemed to have some definite suspicions, but Junko could not answer.

“We have no information on that yet, but he is with them, so they should be fine no matter what happens.”

Lily tapped her desk in irritation.

“You mean Sai Akuto? I agree it’s silly to worry about the empress’s safety. I’m asking whether this was CIMO 8’s doing or not.”

Junko had her doubts about Lily’s attitude.

“President, what do you want to do about this?”

Lily’s mouth twisted into a grin.

“If you don’t know that, you haven’t been paying attention. I don’t like CIMO 8 and I want to crush them,” she stated clearly. “Ever since that Nonimora girl showed up, everyone’s been interested in the future of the empire, but I only care about crushing that group.”

“But that is nothing more than a personal grudge. I only agreed to your summons because I wanted to protect Keena and the others from this conspiracy.”

Junko leaned forward angrily, but Lily calmly reached out and flicked the girl’s forehead.

“Don’t be stupid. Just be honest and say you’re doing it for Sai Akuto. And let me tell you one thing: whether you’re talking about politics or whatever else, most of the world runs on personal grudges. After all, the human race has managed to use the power of grudges to evolve. Remember that. We will be priests one day and by then it’s too late to be surprised.”

“Now you are just being crazy,” complained Junko while holding her forehead.

“Whether you believe it or not, you’ll see it firsthand before long. You’ll see what kind of work goes into protecting this empire. Your Hattori family might even receive orders directly from CIMO 8. But I think I know how you’d handle that given how you disobeyed orders in the past.”

“That was…”

“You don’t have to defend yourself. If you understand the theory behind this, then go convince your father.”

“Eh?”

Lily’s sudden topic change confused Junko.

“The Imperial Knights were shot down, so the rest of the knights aren’t going to stay quiet. But CIMO 8 will have made preparations to avoid that. My guess is they’ll blame it on the Merlai.”

“Oh… I get it.”

“And if it comes to war, the Hattori family will act as commander. But we also need to make sure it doesn’t come to war. If a nation’s ruler does a good job of reading the general atmosphere of the people, a war isn’t hard to start.”

Lily was suitably convincing and Junko pulled away from the desk while feeling embarrassed her own thoughts had not made it that far.

“Understood.”

“Civilian control is meaningless. Propaganda and conspiracies are the way to win,” said Lily with a smile. “That’s what makes this so dangerous.”

At that point, a telepathic call arrived from Hiroshi.

“Oh, excuse me. …What is it?”

Hiroshi’s frantic voice reached her mind.

<I’m about to begin pursuit. I’ve detected one of them.>

“Understood. Please provide periodic reports on their location.”

Lily closed the connection and grinned.

“Good. They’ve started moving.”

“Hiroshi is pursuing them, right? Should I go too?” asked Junko.

“No.” Lily shook her head. “Deal with your father first. And if Hiroshi’s found someone, it means they’re a decoy. They’d never miss his shoddy attempt at

tailing them. However, this definitely means they've started moving, so we just have to check in the opposite direction from Hiroshi." She spoke calmly. "I need to make sure the three officers are ready to move when his next report comes in."

"I see…"

Junko realized she was no match for this student council president.

Lily's conjecture turned out to be dead on.

Kei and The One watched as Rubbers and Hiroshi moved away between the buildings of the capital's city center.

<Now then. The foolish pursuer has latched onto the rubber man.>

They were still in public, so The One communicated telepathically.

It was early afternoon and the two of them were in the government district. They looked like a wealthy and beautiful boy walking a large dog.

"Well, when he turns off the rubber form, he's just a large bald man."

Kei spoke aloud and laughed.

<It seems Rubbers and that boy have met before.>

"It must have been during the war at the school. I don't know the details, but I don't like that boy who owns the Brave suit. After all, he must be an acquaintance of Kento's."

Kei's smile vanished in an instant and he sent a cold glare toward Hiroshi's receding back.

<Did USD say anything?> asked The One as if the mention of Kento had reminded him.

"We met the day before, so we talked about a lot, but nothing was all that different. He didn't suspect me at all."

<Did he say anything concerning the Formless Power?>

"He didn't say anything more than you have. He did say we have to acquire it all costs, though."

<Is that so? Now, are you ready?> asked The One suddenly.

"You sure are insistent." Kei laughed. "And yes, there are no problems."

The boy and dog entered a nearby building.

“You thought you’d lost us, but we’re still following you, arinsu.”

Ootake Michie laughed while hiding on a nearby rooftop. She was one of the three officers of the student council and she specialized in using small mechanical life forms, so she also specialized in tracking people.

焼肉

“Something bothers me about that building,” said Yoshie with a tilt of the head.

It was unclear if she had been listening to Michie’s bragging or not. She pushed up the goggles she used as binoculars and turned to the small L’Isle-Adam next to her.

“Keisu, do you remember anything?”

“No, nothing. But I’m well aware that I’m not very smart.”

That was not modesty. Keisu was quite dumb for a L’Isle-Adam and she had a harder time thinking things through than a human. Her clothes and speech were old fashioned and she could be called the very first L’Isle-Adam.

“Oh, that’s right.” Yoshie turned to Michie. “Now, how should we pursue them?”

Yoshie and Keisu were working with the three officers in order to add Keisu’s analysis ability and Yoshie’s newly made mana canceler to Michie’s tracking ability. Keisu’s mana could not be detected by modern systems, so Yoshie had used that and successfully created a field around Keisu that hid people from the gods. As Hiroshi drew CIMO 8’s attention, they had successfully hidden themselves.

“We can’t exactly enter the building, arinsu. I’ll contact Arnoul and Kanna who we had chase after them, arinsu.”

Michie sent an encrypted telepathic call to Arnoul and Kamiyama Kanna, the other two student council officers.

However, she did not receive the answer she wanted.

<I can’t pursue any further, gya. But I did see them get on the elevator, gya. It only goes down to the second basement, so I can watch and see how far they go down, gya.>

But then Kanna’s voice grew surprised.

<The light disappeared at the second basement and it isn’t coming back, gya.>

“So they’re going even deeper.”

That comment reminded Yoshie of something, so she brought a hand to her forehead and thought.

After a moment, she suddenly clapped her hands and immediately contacted Fujiko telepathically.

“Hey, Etou-san. Do you remember the coordinates from that incident?”

“Understood. I will discuss this with the student council president first. Do not take any hasty actions until I do.”

Fujiko sounded calm enough, but she was actually seething with anger. The only reason she had not immediately taken action was due to her self-preservation instincts winning out over her anger.

She visited the student council room and suddenly spoke under the assumption that the three officers had already contacted the president.

“This would take a long time to explain.”

“I heard what Kita Yoshie said secondhand, but it wasn’t enough to understand it. What exactly is this about?” asked Lily. “All I know is that there’s something under that building.”

Fujiko lowered her voice so no one else could hear.

“I checked the coordinates and that is the place where the demon king resurrection ceremony was held. Although only Soga Keena and I went there, so almost no one remembers it.”

“Back then, huh?” Lily was left almost speechless. “I only heard about that ‘resurrection’, but it is true he came back from there as a true demon king.”

“Yes. I placed him in the device.”

Fujiko sounded somehow proud of that fact.

“But if they’re going there, does it mean what I think it means?”

Lily looked concerned for once and Fujiko nodded.

“They are attempting to create a new demon king.”

“But Sai Akuto was most likely born somewhere else, right? So why are they going there?”

“To be born as a demon king like Akuto-sama was, you of course must be born as a child. It is also possible only one such individual can exist at a single time.”

“Then that’s all the more reason why a normal person couldn’t become a demon king.”

Lily almost sounded like she was trying to put herself at ease, but Fujiko shook her head.

“I do not like to show off my own failure, but remember when Akuto-sama started a war in this academy?”

“Yes? What about it?”

“To produce the mana waves needed to control the demonic beasts, I cultivated some of Akuto-sama’s cells, but that rubber man stole them.”

“That guy known as Rubbers? I doubt Sai Akuto would be careless enough to let someone cultivate his cells now, but there’s nothing he can do if it had already happened. Anyway, are you saying it’s possible to turn a normal person into a demon king by adding in those cells?” Lily stood up. “If we know the coordinates, we can transfer there. If we do so from inside the school, we can rely on the academy’s resources.”

“It looks like we have no other choice,” said Fujiko with a shrug.

“You want me to come back? They knew I was following them from the beginning?”

Hiroshi was left dumbfounded after he was telepathically informed of the truth.

He had already spent a long time tracking the man. He had received this telepathic call just after finding it odd that his target had left the city center and entered a building that was under construction.

When he carefully observed the skinhead man once more, the man turned around. His skin grew black as it transformed into the rubber indicated by his name. He stared directly at Hiroshi as he became perfectly smooth and non-human. This was the face of Rubbers that Hiroshi had seen before.

“So I was tricked,” muttered Hiroshi.

Unexpectedly, Rubbers spoke.

“That’s right.”

That sharp reply in a deep male voice was accompanied by his right arm quickly extending.

Hiroshi realized he could not evade, so he simply muttered the word “Brave”. The transfer field created when the suit transferred in defended against the arm.

It was unclear if Rubbers could feel pain because he grinned as his arm was harshly deflected.

“Having a guy do it feels a bit different from a girl. Having it be a girl is better of course.”

Hiroshi frowned at the perverted feel of his tone.

“You say some strange things. Anyway, I don’t have time to deal with you. You can play on your own.”

The day’s work was already complete at the construction site, so there was no one around. Hiroshi activated the suit’s flight ability and began to ascend.

“Hold it! I was simply told to stall for time!”

Rubbers extended his arm again and grabbed at Hiroshi’s foot.

“Kh!”

Hiroshi gave up on rising and swung the high frequency blade equipped on his right arm. This caused Rubbers to let go and return his arm to normal.

“Are you aware you can’t win in a straight fight?” asked Hiroshi to provoke his opponent.

But Rubbers showed no sign of being affected by it.

“Well aware,” he said mockingly. “No one would be stupid enough to face someone equipped with mana canceler.”

A look of anger reached Hiroshi’s face instead and he moved quickly toward Rubbers.

“That just means I have to take the fight to you!”

But Rubbers remained unfazed despite the fact that any magic user would fear having Brave rush at them.

“That doesn’t matter. I just have to flee.”

Rubbers slipped into the half-constructed building.

“I’m faster than you!”

Hiroshi tried to pursue further, but he stopped when he realized the man had entered a space too narrow for a normal human. He had entered the gap between ceiling and floor that would eventually hold the complex air conditioning system.

“You damn rubber man!”

Hiroshi clicked his tongue.

“I know some of that suit’s shortcomings and I have analyzed your movement patterns.”

Rubbers's voice echoed from the building's framework.

"So what?" replied Hiroshi. "You don't seem able to create a field to shut out the suit's energy and you don't seem able to shut down the suit's devices themselves."

During his series of battles against the late Empress Kazuko, the weaknesses of the supposedly invincible Brave suit had been made clear. If it was surrounded in a virtual alternate dimension field, its transfer of energy would be cut off. However, only a magician on Kazuko or Akuto's level could manage that.

Also, the Brave suit itself had been given to him by Yamato Bouichirou. That meant anyone who knew the code could shut it down from the outside. Currently, that code was supposedly held by USD, but USD had not shown himself here.

That left no reason why Hiroshi would lose to Rubbers.

"Like I said, my objective is to buy time. To maintain your reputation, you can't destroy this building. All I have to do is continue making small, insignificant attacks," sneered Rubbers.

"Why is USD letting me attack you when he could stop this suit?"

Sensing a contradiction, Hiroshi decided to ask.

"I never know what USD is thinking. Plus, this has nothing to do with him."

That answer confused Hiroshi.

"What?"

"As you've probably guessed, a plan is in motion. USD may have started that plan, but we've moved the timetable up without him. This has nothing to do with him."

"What are you trying to do?"

"Why the hell would I tell you!? Don't you get it? As long as you're using that suit, you're nothing more than a pawn in USD's game. He has you under his control. If I went ahead and told you everything, I'd be telling it to him!"

Rubbers's voice grew louder as he continued.

He may have been losing his cool or he may have been delighting at the mental pain he was causing. Either way, Hiroshi understood he could not have a proper conversation with the man. That said, it was clear Rubbers was telling the truth.

"You don't need to tell me because I already know."

Hiroshi tried to end the conversation there, but Rubbers was stubborn.

“Not a chance. I don’t know why Yamato Bouichirou chose someone like you. In fact, I don’t even know what he wanted you to do. You have no grand ambitions, you have no real philosophical views, your family is nothing, and you have no ability. Your one virtue is how readily you go along with what people tell you. In other words, it’s easy for certain types of people to make use of you.”

“…Shut up!”

Hiroshi swung his high frequency blade to sever Rubbers's stretched arm, but he forgot to activate the mana canceler as he did so. The blade was unable to cut through the rubber body and the arm simply bent.

"As a more experienced fighter, let me give you a piece of advice: don't try to rush things."

Rubbers mocked Hiroshi's mistake.

"Tch."

Hiroshi began searching for a way to leave this place, but an arm extended toward him when he tried to fall back.

"Dammit!"

He grew angry, but not only because he was having difficulty leaving. Rubbers's comments had been right on the mark.

"You all go help Hiroshi."

Lily telepathically gave the three officers that instruction. The three of them, Yoshie, and Keisu were surprised, but they obediently replied.

"So it will just be the two of us?" asked Fujiko.

Those two girls were in the demon king's castle below the academy. Ever since losing Peterhausen, Akuto had stayed away from that area and Fujiko's remodeling job had given it an eerie atmosphere.

"Is that a problem?"

"Of course it is. We are heading into danger and I can only assume you sent your three officers away for that very reason."

"Correct. Then again, Hiroshi does seem to be in danger, so it wasn't a bad decision for that reason either. Anyway, I'll be doing most of the work, so there's nothing to worry about. I know you're quick to flee, so you can start running if it gets dangerous. But I want you with me because you have the most data on the demon king."

"Fine. I will begin the transfer."

Fujiko stepped inside the transfer circle, waited for Lily to follow, and entered the coordinates.

The circle glowed and their surroundings completely changed.

Fujiko had seen the new scenery before, but Lily spoke in surprise as she had not.

“This place is huge. I’d have never guessed there was a space like this underground.”

The ceiling was quite a ways up for being underground. A faint light illuminated the thick columns which were similar to those inside buildings and were placed fairly far apart.

It was unclear how far that row of columns extended, but the space was easily larger than a soccer field.

“It may be huge, but I knew the exact coordinates, so the problem lies directly before us,” said Fujiko.

“Yeah. So it seems.”

Lily faced directly forward where a tube extended down from above. It ended at the coffin Akuto had used before. Previously, the coffin had been all alone, but it seemed to have been modified in the short time since then. Various new devices had been attached, the most conspicuous being the aforementioned tube. It may have been an extension to an elevator.

A long-haired dog sat in front of the coffin protecting the person inside.

“A dog?” asked Fujiko doubtfully.

The three officers had indeed reported the target walking with a dog, but it was strange to find just a dog and a person in the coffin.

“We should stay on our guard,” said Lily with a hint of amusement. “There’s a strange look in its eyes.”

“Its eyes? I can’t see them through all the fur.”

Lily bared her teeth in a smile.

“That’s not what I meant. If you change your viewpoint a bit, you’d be able to tell.”

Lily immediately extended a fist to punch the dog, but the only one surprised by the action was Fujiko.

“What are you doing!?”

“Hah. That’s no ordinary dog.”

Lily’s fist stopped right in front of the dog because a mana shield had opened in front of it.

“I see.” Fujiko backed away. “This really isn’t an ordinary dog.”

“Heh. It’s always a surprise every time I meet a new person from CIMO 8. In this case, it isn’t even a ‘person’.”

Lily's sharp tongue received a response.

"What a rude little girl," said the dog. "I can tell you did not have a proper upbringing."

Fujiko was dumbfounded, but Lily seemed to have predicted the dog would speak. Either that or her anger over being called a "little girl" drowned out her surprise.

"Like a dog would have any kind of upbringing whatsoever! I'll make a nice dog-meat hotpot out of you and then throw it out uneaten, so prepare yourself!"

Lily advanced toward the dog.

"It would take a while to explain my upbringing, but I will tell you my codename is The One. I think it is about time you learned the humiliation of being killed by a dog!"

The One intercepted Lily's advance head on. She specialized in physical combat and he challenged her with his canine body rather than with magic.

"Oryaaah!" roared Lily.

The dog howled in response.

An instant later, Lily cried out in surprise. She had sent out countless punches with both hands, but The One had blocked them all with just his front paws.

"What!?"

The way he stood on his hind legs and quickly moved his short front legs looked like a dog playing with his master. However, Lily was the one being played with here.

"Damn you."

She stopped throwing punches and took a step back.

The One took a breath and exposed his canine teeth in a smile.

"I was not trying to mock me. It just so happens to look facetious when I do it with this body."

"Thanks for your consideration," said Lily with a glance to Fujiko.

Fujiko understood what she meant: they had not come here to fight a dog.

"Then let's keep at it."

Lily charged forward once more and The One intercepted her again. Their fists and paws clashed once more, but Fujiko took action this time.

However, she did not join in the bizarre battle against a dog. She began running in a wide arc to circle behind The One.

“This was our original goal, so I will stop the demon king creation process!”

“I knew you would try that. And even if we were doing this covertly, you should have given some thought to the fact that no one but me was here for protection.”

Without any real concentration, The One created a mana barrier covering the coffin in front of Fujiko.

“And I expected this much! I can break through a barrier like this!”

She reached out and expanded some mana. Normally, mana grew weaker the farther it was from the magic user’s body. The One may have been able to create a barrier of solidified mana without much concentration, but it would not be difficult to break through if she touched it directly.

But Fujiko’s hand failed to take it apart.

“Impossible!”

At only a few steps away from the coffin, she was blocked by a translucent wall of blue light.

“Why can’t you break through a simple barrier!?” shouted Lily.

However, Fujiko seemed just as confused.

“I don’t know! I can only imagine its composition is different! I can’t break it apart in the slightest!”

“I intertwined the mana in a way that is difficult for humans to imagine,” said The One. “You will never untangle it as long as you think about this normally.”

“Are you really a dog!?”

Lily raised her voice and ran forward to slip past The One, but he circled in front of her with the swiftness of a dog and she was forced to continue the fistfight.

“It does not matter to you who I am. Now, I believe it is about time. Assuming Sakura Kei did not die in there, that is.”

Fujiko had been circling around the coffin to find a hole in the barrier, but just as The One finished speaking, she saw a scene she had seen before.

Light leaked from the coffin and steamy smoke rose from the slight gap that opened.

The only difference was the person inside.

“Ah!”

She realized it was already too late and she could only watch as this unknown person stood up before her.

The coffin fully opened and the figure inside came into view.

The action had a bewitching elegance that seemed out of place given the location.

“Eh?”

Fujiko found herself charmed and she stopped trying to break the barrier.

The figure’s lowered head smoothly turned upward and their long hair spread out like a butterfly’s wings. The scene resembled a butterfly leaving the chrysalis. Akuto’s rebirth had been filled with a sinister strength that made it truly look like the birth of a demon king, but this looked more like the birth of a beautiful demon.

“I didn’t think a human could endure it, but it looks like it worked.”

A cruel smile appeared on The One’s canine face.

“You don’t mean…”

Lily stopped fighting, backed away, and gained a look of concern.

“You’ve awoken a new one?” muttered Fujiko.

As if in response, the new demon king spread his arms toward the unseen sky in ecstasy.

“This is…amazing. I can see it all. I can see everyone’s records.”

Kei was not wearing any clothes. Fujiko had originally thought he was a girl, but his lack of clothes told her otherwise. However, she could not look away. His actions were truly beautiful.

“So this is the power of a demon king. Every resource is at my fingertips. I can use everything in the world.”

He raised his hands and clothes flew down to wrap around his body.

“Not even I’m sure if I transferred these here or created them.”

He then turned toward Fujiko.

She jumped in fright, but could not move even a step.

He smiled.

“You’re the one that prepared the demon king’s cells, aren’t you?”

There was nothing she could say to that.

“S-so what…if I am?”

“I have a part of the one you love inside me, so I wanted to ask if you love me.”

She was taken aback by his innocent question.

“I-I don’t know…”

“I see. Well, we did only just meet. But that’s not your real answer. I can tell. You would never be able to love me. After all, you thought I was beautiful just now, didn’t you? People who see me that way never seem able to understand me.”

Kei looked around with oddly clear eyes while acting like Fujiko’s answer did not matter in the slightest.

“I thought I might find someone like me if I could see the data on every imperial citizen. I had hoped to find someone who could understand me even a little, but this is amazing. There isn’t anyone. I’m the only one like this. I feel like I’m standing all alone below a never-ending expanse of blue sky. It’s refreshing but horribly worrying. So this is what it means to see everything.”

He spoke those lonely words with what looked like a beautiful girl’s face. It felt somehow fleeting, but he waved a hand and his expression completely changed.

A violent gust of wind blew through.

“Ee!”

“Tch!”

Fujiko and Lily tried to stand firm against the raging wind, but they were blown backwards a moment later. They were fortunate that the area was so large. That softened the blow of landing and they were able to escape almost all damage. If they had struck a wall instead, they would not have been so lucky.

“That isn’t what I wanted. I was hoping for something that felt more solid.”

Kei sounded disappointed and turned his gaze toward the two girls.

“Sorry I couldn’t be more solid.”

Lily stood up and took long strides toward Kei.

He tilted his head in confusion and then snapped his fingers in realization.

“No, that isn’t it. I thought it would have more recoil. I thought I would feel some resistance as it blew through.”

“Are you not even paying attention to us?”

Lily cursed, but she could do nothing more.

She could not even take another step.

Kei had done nothing more than turn a cold look toward her and then he started speaking to her.

“There is deep meaning behind killing someone. I understand that now that I’m a demon king. That means I only just figured it out. But going by that understanding, to kill someone is to eliminate the possibilities of everything they might have accomplished in the future.”

He looked like a child excited about a newly understood concept.

“What of it? That’s a really basic idea,” said Lily with no understanding of what he was thinking.

“That’s right.” He nodded. “It is basic. But has anyone tried to turn that idea on its head? If someone is going to eliminate others’ future possibilities or someone has no future possibilities whatsoever, then it’s okay to kill them.”

His expression was bright.

“Did you realize that after looking at everyone’s logs?” asked Lily in disgust. “Do you think you’re a real god or something?”

Her sardonic tone did nothing to move his heart.

“A god? Perhaps I should call myself a demon god. No, it doesn’t matter. And I don’t want to kill you. That has no relation to what I must do. You could say I now stand in a position to accurately judge who can and can’t be killed. In that way, I’m just like a real god.”

Lily listened to his refreshing tone of voice.

“What is it that you ‘must do’?”

“Well… Oh, look. It’s started. I need to protect this place from them.”

He suddenly looked up into empty space as if he had sensed something.

“What exactly has started?” asked Lily.

“You’ll know soon enough,” was all Kei said.

He picked up The One, lightly kicked off the ground, and flew up into the air.

Lily and Fujiko did not know what to do, so they stood still. When they had faced Kazuko, their opponent had still been human, but that was not the case here.

“Are you just going to let her go?” whispered Fujiko.

“This is the first time I’ve felt like I can’t even resist,” whispered back Lily.

“Come to think of it, you have never seen Akuto-sama fight seriously.”

“Next time I meet Sai Akuto, I might have to treat him differently. …Anyway, it looks like someone who can actually handle this has arrived.”

Lily looked up and grinned.

As Kei and The One ascended, the ceiling above them began to crack.

“Something’s coming from above?” muttered Fujiko.

“This is why I sent the three officers away. Although if I’d known we would be facing a demon king right away, I could’ve used him more effectively. At least he managed to arrive in time.”

She grinned again and the ceiling collapsed.

Brave burst from the rubble while travelling down from aboveground. In other words, it was Hiroshi.

“That’s the one!” shouted Lily. “Knock him from the air!”

Whether he heard her or sensed the demon king with his suit, Hiroshi travelled directly toward Kei.

Kei tossed The One into the air and prepared to fight.

The One stopped in midair under his own power.

Hiroshi charged toward Kei who remained motionless, but in the instant they were about to make contact, Hiroshi’s momentum suddenly vanished and he started falling.

“Eh? Hey!”

“Oh, dear…”

Lily and Fujiko panicked.

Hiroshi was no longer wearing his suit, so a boy wearing casual clothes fell upside down toward the ground.

“What are you doing?”

Lily extended an arm toward where he would land and caught him. He had to be able to use at least one type of flight magic, but he must have forgotten in shock.

But the real problem was what had caused that shock.

“Look…”

Fujiko poked at Lily and looked uneasily backwards.

A transfer circle had appeared and someone was appearing from it.

“Tch. Someone else is arriving?”

Lily’s click of the tongue produced a response from Hiroshi who had finally realized what had happened.

“Is it USD!?”

Just as he guessed, it was Kento, aka USD, who appeared from the transfer circle.

“I took the liberty of removing your suit.”

His voice was calm to the point of sounding disagreeable.

“So you were lying in wait this whole time?” asked Lily.

However, Kento did not immediately reply.

He looked up at Kei with a look that was half criticism and half concern.

“Why did you do this without my permission?” he asked the boy.

A unique atmosphere seemed to flow between the two of them. Despite the distance, Lily and Fujiko could sense it as well.

“Because I don’t need your permission,” explained Kei.

“I put off this stage because I wasn’t sure your body could endure it.”

“But I’m fine. It was worth trying.”

“The risk was too great. If we lost you, the plan could not continue.”

Kento’s tone was impossibly calm given what he was saying and Kei’s responses were filled with a cruel air.

“Like I said, it turned out all right. That means this is my plan now. And since you’re here, it means you realized everything has already started. In that case, I’ll act accordingly.”

A hint of irritation could be heard in Kei’s voice.

Once he was finished speaking, he turned around, grabbed The One again, and flew to the surface through the hole Hiroshi had created.

“This is a problem…”

Kento watched the boy leave, but he gave an exaggerated shrug as if it was not really that much of a problem.

“I feel like I just watched a lover’s spat,” complained Lily with a murderous look.

“Could you explain what exactly is happening here?”

Fujiko looked coldly at him as well.

“We had a plan to create a demon king like this ever since Rubbers stole Sai Akuto-kun’s cells, but it was temporarily frozen due to insufficient research. That was my plan.”

Taken aback by his odd willingness to speak, Lily asked a question.

“Then what is it that has started? And does it really require the power of a demon king?”

“A war,” said Kento.

“A war?” repeated Fujiko doubtfully.

In the empire, the word “war” meant nothing more serious than what Akuto had caused before. Simply put, no other nation could oppose the empire. In a way, creating a demon king was starting a war, so doing so because of a war sounded like circular reasoning.

But Kento continued.

“A nation is going to declare war against the empire. Or rather, they will be reluctantly made to do so.”

“What is going on today?” Lily shook her head. “Just how many unpredictable things am I going to be faced with?”

“I do believe that the Hattori family is prepared,” said Hattori Youzou.

He was the head of the Hattori family, Junko’s father, and the high priest in charge of reconstructing the god named Suhara.

He was speaking in the Hattori family’s sitting room while Junko and Yuuko sat before him. They were all wearing ordinary clothes, but the strict atmosphere indicated that this was not a casual family discussion. They were speaking as the family in charge of national defense.

“I am prepared,” said Junko.

“I will not sully the family name,” said Yuuko.

They were faced with a coming “war” of the sort the empire had not experienced for ages. Needless to say, not even the elderly Youzou had experienced something like this. He maintained his air of dignity, but his understanding of the situation was no greater than Junko’s.

The Suhara priests were being kept from the situation in ways unrelated to the loss of Suhara. The mana screen in front of the three family members displayed a news broadcast.

<An undersea kingdom that split off from the empire over a century ago is claiming a legitimate successor to the imperial throne and is planning to contact the government.>

<The cabinet is preparing for negotiations, but they will be taking a strong stance against any possible disrespect to the empress who is currently vacationing to the south.>

<The empress is still missing and we are all worried about her safety. There is still a high possibility that she has been harmed by the undersea

kingdom. They insist that their king is a member of the royal family and some say they are questioning the legitimacy of the current empress.>

The screen displayed several ships that were clearly not of the imperial style. They were spindle-shaped, so they most likely had submarine abilities. This was clearly a fleet sent by the undersea kingdom.

“We have indeed received reports from the L’Isle-Adams manning the patrol boats. It is also true that the empress has gone missing,” said Youzou. “However, we have been keeping that information hidden.”

The Hattori family also carried out intelligence work for national defense. That made information warfare one of their specialties, but things had gone differently this time. The cabinet had released information they had been told not to.

“Father, with this made public, it will develop into war, won’t it?” asked Yuuko.

With her idol work, she had good instincts for this kind of thing.

Youzou agreed.

“Even if this is part of the cabinet’s information manipulation, we must work toward what the people want.”

“That’s the same as an idol,” said Yuuko with a laugh.

Youzou rebuked her attitude, but then he smiled because she seemed to understand the truth.

However, Junko did not seem to agree.

“I am prepared, but I think it is also our duty to correct the people if they are wrong.”

“Junko.” Youzou’s tone was fairly harsh. “It is not our job to judge what is right or wrong. If we think about whether it is right or not, we cannot protect anyone. That is how it works.”

“But…”

“We fight for those who cannot and we kill for the sake of others, so we must not choose who it is we should kill.”

“I understand the theory, but someone is manipulating the information and we more or less know who.”

Junko’s tone grew stronger, but Youzou still shook his head.

“We can only trust that the people will make the right decision. Even if we have been betrayed in the past, that is all we can do. The people will be able to see through to what is right.”

“If only Keena and Akuto were here,” muttered Junko.

“Trusting them is fine, but you should become the kind of person they can trust. That is how you should live your life,” instructed Youzou.

That was when a member of the Hattori ninja forces appeared on the other side of the room’s sliding door. Youzou sensed his presence and asked what the ninja needed.

“We have a report from the naval patrol. Someone has ignored the warnings and attempted to approach the target.”

“What do you mean by ‘someone’?”

Youzou asked for a clearer explanation and he received a nervous response.

“It is an individual.”

“What?”

“A single individual has appeared on the ocean and is approaching the target.”

“Is that even possible?”

“I know it is hard to believe, but it is the truth. According to the reports, it is a demon king.”

“A demon king?”

Junko and Yuuko both turned toward the paper door.

“Yes. To be clear, it is not Sai Akuto, but their presence and amount of mana put them on the same level as him.”

The ninja’s words brought a confused look to Junko’s face.

—*What is going on?*

“An undersea kingdom?”

Lily sounded doubtful, but she nodded in understanding once she saw the news broadcast on Fujiko’s mana screen.

She, Fujiko, Hiroshi were still underground because Kento was keeping them there.

“They refer to themselves as a republic, but they’re actually an aristocracy with a king,” explained Kento. “That makes them rather unique.”

“So their system is similar to the empire’s?” asked Lily.

Kento nodded.

“But they have a different set of values from us. They do have a magical society like we do, but they have a single god and no magical restrictions.”

That surprised Fujiko.

“That sounds a lot like the ideals of black magicians.”

“That’s right. But that isn’t the problem. Well, the difference in values may lead to problems, but their king is currently on a ship leading here. How he views us will have a large effect on what happens next.”

Kento’s explanation seemed indirect, but Lily understood what he was getting at.

“I see. So their king is responding to the Jewel Branch of Hourai.”

“That’s right. That’s the only explanation for their king coming to the surface. And he might want something.”

“He might want the Jewel Branch of Hourai or even the empire itself,” said Lily as she thought.

“He almost certainly wants the Formless Power that lies beyond the Jewel Branch of Hourai. If not, he has no reason to approach this far. However, we of CIMO 8 could receive no information beyond that when we made preliminary contact.”

“So you did contact them ahead of time.”

Lily glared at Kento with a displeased look, but he ignored it.

“Of course. The reason we do not know what he is after is because they were still friendly when we contacted them. Their king wanted to participate in a fair emperor selection.”

“What is wrong with that?” asked Fujiko. “It seems fine to me.”

Kento shrugged.

“Sadly, people cannot trust that kind of attitude. The priests of Mufa are in charge of overseas negotiations, but they remain highly cautious.”

“It looks like things only change if they can make it inside the empire like Nonimora did.”

Kento looked doubtful.

“That may have been part of it, but it had more to do with the secret she had that linked the Jewel Branch of Hourai with the Formless Power. In other words, the empire is hoping to take something from the Merlai.”

“I understand why, but what exactly is the Formless Power?”

“We only have predictions at this stage, but it’s related to what The One is plotting.”

“What is that skinny guy hoping to do as the demon king? Was that The One’s doing?”

“The One is deceiving him.”

Kento said nothing more.

“Then why did you turn off his suit?” asked Lily with a glance back toward Hiroshi.

“Because killing him would accomplish nothing.” Kento approached Hiroshi. “But I would like your help.”

“My help?”

Hiroshi looked displeased, but Kento continued nonetheless.

“Yes. You are the only one who can fight a demon king, so I want you to stop The One’s conspiracy.”

Hiroshi did not reply, but Lily asked another question.

“But we don’t understand anything here. What is this conspiracy?”

“Most likely, it will ultimately lead to the annihilation of the human race.”

Despite the horrifying words, Kento spoke casually.

The others all fell into a confused silence.

When Lily finally opened her mouth, the venom had left her tone.

“Annihilation? Isn’t that a bit of an exaggeration?”

But Kento folded his arms and shook his head as if to say it was true and there was nothing he could do to change that fact.

“The One is not human. He is a survivor from another dimension. To put it more simply, you could call him an alien.”

“Geh.”

“Oh, my…”

Lily and Fujiko clearly did not believe him.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but the Formless Power has likely come from a place we cannot detect. We planned to acquire the Jewel Branch of Hourai which acts as a key to acquiring that power and it can only be used by those with imperial blood.”

“Then why didn’t you act when Nonimora was…?” Lily trailed off as she realized the answer. “Oh, I get it. She’s supposed to protect the Jewel Branch of Hourai.”

Kento nodded.

“That is why we contacted the Republic rather than the Merlai. It all goes back to my plan.”

“Your plan?”

“My plan to acquire the Formless Power. If it was all resolved peacefully, even Akuto-kun would say nothing about it. It just had to be something the people decided on. Simply put, it could have been solved through friendly talks with the Republic. At the same time, we were preparing for war just in case. After all, the Republic could easily shake our very foundation.”

“I see. I assume The One was pressing for the war side of things.”

“Yes. He thought the losses could be minimized by abducting their king.”

“Cruel but effective,” said Lily cynically while exposing her teeth.

“So now the imperial people are having their information regulated while the new demon king and the Republic’s advance fleet glare at each other?” asked Fujiko in exasperation.

“That’s right. So I need you to stop this new demon king. That is the most effective method of saving the empire.”

Kento held a hand out toward Hiroshi.

Hiroshi looked up at him, but turned one eye aside as if pouting.

“If I know you, you have a plan for if I refuse.”

Kento narrowed his eyes as if to say “so you understand”.

“Of course I do. But I am hoping for you to have a conscience.”

“A conscience? Don’t be ridiculous. You just want to use me as you wish.”

Hiroshi shook his head and turned his back on Kento.

“That is true to an extent, but you have no other choice here.”

Hiroshi did not turn back around.

“I’m out too. I won’t let this go according to plan for you.” Lily followed after Hiroshi. “Then again, I’ve been working him pretty hard myself, so this is partially my fault. Still, I want nothing to do with you. Part of me wants to fight you, but your attitude has killed off even that desire.”

Fujiko sighed and followed Hiroshi as well.

“What you told us has given me something else I want to do. It seems you are hiding some other plan or ulterior motive here, but it is only women who look more captivating while hiding things and lying about their feelings.”

Despite all this, Kento did not look remotely shocked. With a glance back at him, Hiroshi entered the transfer circle. Lily started to follow, but she turned around as something occurred to her.

“Oh, right. You misread one thing here.”

“And what is that?” asked Kento.

Lily grinned.

“He became a true hero a while back.”

Lily and Fujiko disappeared into the transfer circle, leaving Kento all alone.

—All I’m doing is pouting.

Hiroshi thought as he sat on a park bench.

He had been able to leave that place after being saved by the student council’s three officers, Yoshie, and Keisu, but Rubbers’s words still caught in his heart.

—I know you can never live up to an ideal, but he was still right. That’s why the president has been able to use me as she wants.

“Why are you staring off into space like that?”

That sudden voice caused Hiroshi to frantically stand up.

“Wh-what is it!?”

Yuuko laughed at him.

“Ah ha ha. What are you doing? You’re acting funny.”

She wore a hat and glasses that changed her overall impression, so no one else in the park recognized her.

“I was just thinking,” he said to dodge the question.

Yuuko grabbed his hand and began walking.

“You can do that later. Look, I made us lunch!”

They searched for an arbitrary place in the park.

The park’s mana screen normally showed calming images, but today it was showing the news with text scrolling at the bottom.

The stare-off with the Republic’s fleet was continuing. The news claimed conflict was unavoidable. Hiroshi and Yuuko hoped nothing would happen because they knew the truth behind it, but the general public was naturally in favor of eliminating the Republic. The optimistic idea that that the Republic could easily retreat helped bring the pacifists onboard and it was expected that it would not develop past a small skirmish.

And if that happened, Yuuko would have work to do. This was likely her last day off, so she had called for Hiroshi during her free time.

“Let’s eat over there.”

She spread a sheet over the park’s lawn.

“These rice balls have a new flavor of furikake I got from a sponsor.”

“You’re turning into a furikake celebrity.”

They spoke and ate Yuuko’s lunch, but due to the surrounding atmosphere, an odd aura would occasionally cover them as well.

“The Republic is meaningless before the legitimacy of the empire!”

A group had opened a large mana screen in the park and was broadcasting a speech. No one went out of their way to watch it and no one gathered around it, but no one complained either.

A few people walking by spoke in hushed voices as if they did not want everyone knowing what they were thinking.

“Should we go elsewhere?”

“It would be the same anywhere else.”

“I don’t like the feeling spreading through the city.”

“You can’t really blame them with what’s happening.’

“Honestly! You’re acting weird too, Hiroshi-kun. You have Hoshino Yuri-chan with you, so be a man and put on a brave face!”

She poked at his forehead and he smiled, but it was a stiff smile.

“I’m just worried about a lot. That’s all.”

“Worried? It’s okay. I won’t be going on the front lines.”

“It isn’t you I’m worried about.”

“Eh? Isn’t that kind of cruel?”

“That isn’t what I meant. Even if you are on the front lines, I’ll save you, so there’s nothing to worry about there.”

“Oh, that’s the cool boy I know.”

She gave a carefree smile, but a shadow hung over Hiroshi’s smile.

“So is there something else you’re worried about?’

“Well…yes.”

“Speak more clearly. That isn’t the cool Hiroshi-kun I know.”

With that comment, she playfully put her chin on his shoulder.

The unexpected proximity of her face set his heart pounding, but it turned out to be a good opportunity.

“Um…Yuuko-chan? What would you do if you were implicitly forced to do something you think you can’t manage or that you don’t want to do?”

The answer came sooner than he expected.

“Eh? I’d refuse.”

“W-well, yes, but what if it’s because you’re being told to do it that makes you not want to do it? Or what if the only reason against it is personally not wanting to, but you feel a strong obligation to do so. Wouldn’t you need more reason than that to not do it?”

As he spoke, he began to lose track of his own argument, but Yuuko seemed to understand because she cut in.

“Oh, so that’s what you mean. In that case, it’s basically the same as a job. I can tell because my job is different from a normal person’s. I have to wear weird clothes and I don’t always want to, but there’s a ton of staff and it feels like I have to. And anyone who resists is said to be an ‘artist wannabe’ and ends up getting fewer jobs. Of course, if they really do want to be a true artist, they can succeed like that, but they have to have things they truly want to do and continue ahead that way.”

Yuuko was talking about something wholly unrelated to Hiroshi’s situation, but he found an odd understanding from parts of it.

“Yeah, that’s it. I feel like I’m being forced to fight. And there are people with all sorts of different plans around me and they’re all trying to use me.”

“In my experience…”

Yuuko raised her index finger with an air of importance.

“Yes?”

Hiroshi leaned forward, waiting for her answer.

“You can only give up.”

“Eh?”

She laughed and he was at a loss for words, but she soon continued.

“It’s the same with idols. As an idol, people say all sorts of things about you. If it gets out that you’re dating a boy, your fans will panic and say you betrayed them.”

“Ha ha. That’s definitely true.”

“So you can only give up. After all, they’re saying that about Hoshino Yuri, not about me. Of course, I don’t think of that as an entirely separate identity, so I do worry like you sometimes. People think of Hoshino Yuri as someone a lot more wonderful than I really am, but that’s just due to bad luck.”

“Bad luck?”

“Yes. I’m Hoshino Yuri because of bad luck. The things I did just so happened to be received well by people and my looks just so happened to be what people like. This is just an issue of whether you realize it’s all due to chance or not.”

Yuuko smiled as she spoke.

“Then the reason I have the suit…?”

“That’s the ultimate case of it ‘just so happening’ to work out that way. Someone might try to take that from you, but it’s the same as me being Hoshino Yuri. Being an idol is something you borrow from the fans. If I announce my love or do something mischievous, it would immediately be taken back by them.”

“I guess that’s true…”

“So while you’re borrowing it, you can do what you want with it.”

“But there’s nothing I really want to do.”

“What? Of course there is. You want to protect those around you, don’t you?”

Her casual comment made him feel like she had seen straight through him and it discouraged him a little. He felt like a horribly simple person.

“Yeah… I guess I am that boring…”

“That’s completely normal, so there’s no helping it. It’s surprisingly normal for important jobs to be done by people who can’t think of anything more than that. It just so happens that there are things that no one but them can do.”

Yuuko gave a mischievous smile.

“What is it that only a normal person can do?” he asked.

“Reveal people’s feelings. The people around you are thinking about the empire, society, and other large concepts, right? People like that can easily lose track of their own feelings, so you need to remind them.”

That gave Hiroshi a kind of understanding. The people around him did often seem to set aside their own feelings.

“Come to think of it, you’re right.”

“Yeah, so you should become the kind of hero you can be. Become a hero that expresses everyone’s feelings.”

“I see… You might be right. No, you are right,” he muttered to himself. “There’s still something I want to do.”

“Heh heh. I’m glad I could help,” she said proudly. “My experience as an idol isn’t just for show.”

Suddenly, an unpleasant noise came from Yuuko’s handheld device.

Her expression changed and Hiroshi picked up on it.

“Don’t tell me…”

Yuuko checked the device and displayed a coded message.

“It’s begun. It’s really begun.”

She gave an uneasy look to Hiroshi.

“The war has?” he asked.

“No.” She shook her head. “Remember the strange person who appeared before the Republic’s fleet and won’t listen to us? They’ve started to attack.”

“The new demon king… Sakura Kei…” muttered Hiroshi.

“Sorry. I have to go.”

Yuuko stood up and energy filled Hiroshi’s eyes.

“I’m going too.”

“Eh?”

She turned toward him as he stood up.

“I finally see what I have to do and what I can do.”

He stretched and slapped his own face to psych himself up.

Then he smiled at Yuuko.

“I realized this thanks to you. Thank you, Yuuko-chan.”

Yuuko had never seen this look on his face before, so she blushed.

“Wow, how manly!”

Chapter 3: Fear Falling from the Sky

After falling into the jungle, Akuto groaned in pain while holding Keena.

“That isn’t something to mimic on the fly like that…”

“Ah ha ha ha! You were surprisingly good at falling on the leaves.”

Nonimora laughed happily as she watched Akuto. She had landed on the ground with almost no impact at all by gradually jumping down from leaf to leaf while softening the impact with each tall leaf.

Akuto had tried to mimic her, but he had been holding Keena and most of the branches had broken under his weight. He had fallen straight to the ground, so he might have been seriously injured had it not been after the fall that the mana had cut out.

“Are you okay, A-chan?”

Keena was clearly worried about him.

He did not want to too readily say he was fine, so he moved his body a bit before nodding.

“It seems so. The lack of mana is really obvious. These trees really must be absorbing it.”

“That means the hard part is only just beginning.” Keena sounded worried. “And we only have the rice I brought with me.”

Korone fell from the sky after a slight delay because she had used a parachute.

She landed a short distance away, and after they waited a little longer, she appeared through the trees with the parachute wrapped around her hands.

“It seems I cannot use mana,” she said. “I can use my internal battery, but combat is out of the question. For the same reason, I cannot produce any tools. If I eat like the rest of you, I can convert it into energy, but I will not last more than two weeks.”

“That makes this difficult. We really are going to have to walk out of here.”

Realizing this might be more serious than he though, Akuto placed a hand on his chin.

But Nonimora spoke up cheerfully.

“Don’t worry. The island is small enough to walk from one side to the other in just a few days. And the trees here were modified long ago.”

She ran forward, shinnied up a nearby tree, and jumped down while holding what looked like a large ball.

“You can eat this fruit. They grow all around, so we won’t have trouble finding food. Also, some trees glow at night and some produce water.”

She threw the spherical fruit toward Akuto.

When he caught the fruit and looked closely at its hard skin, he saw thin lines much like the stiches on a soccer ball. When he put some pressure on it, the skin easily broke open and he found a white fruit inside. Nonimora’s expression made it clear he should eat it, so he tore off a piece of fruit. It did not seem to have much moisture and it felt like tearing off a piece of a sponge. He put it in his mouth and found it was halfway between bread and potato.

“I see. So it’s a mass of carbohydrates.”

“Yeah.” Nonimora nodded in satisfaction. “It’s the blessing of nature.”

“Can you really call this natural after modifying it so much?”

He was simply honestly speaking his thoughts, but she pouted her lips angrily.

“It’s more unnatural to think the work of humans isn’t natural. Whether you’re talking about buildings or L’Isle-Adams, they’re natural as long as they’re functioning as they were designed to.” She pointed at Korone. “What isn’t natural is when they don’t do what they’re supposed to. Forcing yourself to do something or going too far is the one unnatural thing. Taking more food than you can eat, continuing to work when you’re tired, continuing to attack someone who has surrendered, or fighting back after you surrender and they stop are all unnatural. If you don’t live naturally, you’ll overlook the blessings of nature.”

“I pride myself in my natural behavior,” said Korone calmly.

Akuto was not sure what to say about Korone’s comment, but he understood what Nonimora meant. And he wanted to understand that thinking even further.

“Then even a theme park is natural?”

Nonimora nodded.

“It was created to be an enjoyable place and that’s what it is. Enjoying your life there is natural. A lot of people think that we’re believing a lie, but what

exactly is truth? We naturally want to know what is true, but taking that too far is unnatural. We can only know the truth as far as science can teach us. Thinking about the truth of anything beyond that is going too far."

Akuto had a feeling she was criticizing him, but he understood her point. He needed more flexibility in his thoughts.

"Even so, there are a lot of people who fully believe lies," he said.

She nodded again.

"That may be the case, but if we live naturally we can talk it out. Spending more than a day alone is unnatural. The problem with you main islanders is that you always live alone and force yourselves to meet other people."

"You're right about that," said Akuto with a nod.

Keena then spoke up sounding displeased.

"Hey, A-chan. We shouldn't be sitting around like this."

It was not like Keena to say that, but she was right. Akuto raised a hand and spoke to Nonimora.

"I apologize for cutting our conversation short, but we do have to start moving."

"That's right," said Nonimora. "Wherever we might be, we just have to head west. Once we see a tall tower, we'll know where the village is."

"A-chan, take the luggage."

Keena called over Akuto while standing next to a suitcase she had thrown out during the crash.

"Fine. By the way, do you have the Jewel Branch of Hourai?"

She pulled the Jewel Branch of Hourai's box out from her own bag she carried.

"Here it is. Don't worry."

As she returned the box to her bag, she let out a quick shriek.

"What is it?"

"A bug flew toward me."

"A bug? Hey, are there bugs around here?"

Akuto found it odd since this was an artificial jungle.

"Even if this place is artificial, the plants are still alive, so they need insects to carry pollen. There's nothing that attacks people, so don't worry."

“I see.”

As Akuto lifted up the suitcase, Keena wrapped her arm around his.

“Let’s go.”

“Sure.”

He nodded and she began walking while pulling on his arm. But she almost fell forward because he did not move.

“C’mon, A-chan. You have to come with me.”

She puffed out her cheeks.

“Um, Keena? I think that’s east.”

“Eh?”

“That’s right.” Nonimora smiled. “The direction all the tree branches are growing is east.”

“Do not worry. I have a compass installed,” said Korone while pointing accurately to the west.

“Mhh. Then let’s go that way.”

Keena began walking.

Normally, Keena would have been the most cheerful one. Even in this situation, she would have been walking along while singing.

“Is something the matter?” asked Akuto.

“Nothing,” she answered.

But she refused to let go of his arm. Akuto was already restricted from flying and this made it all the more difficult for him to walk.

“Why don’t you move away a bit?” he asked.

He was not being bashful and he was not annoyed with her. He simply felt it was inefficient to have her there. However, Keena did not seem to take it that way.

“Uuh… Don’t say it like that.”

She complained while looking up at him with teary eyes.

“What is with you?”

He was unsure what to do, so he simply walked west without saying anything more.

After a while, an obviously inorganic tower came into view through the trees. The only other tall objects on the island were trees, so it made a perfect landmark sticking up well above everything else.

“That’s the tower, right?”

“Yes. It contains the ship to the star.”

“It’s there? How tall is the tower?”

“Less than a thousand meters I think.”

The tower was a straight cylinder colored a shiny silver. They could not make out the details from a distance, but something like a glowing jewel was located at the very top.

“Even if we can see it now, we must still be pretty far away. What is that glowing thing on the top?”

“That is a sign. It’s made to change color when the Formless Power is being used. The Formless Power produced good power only when being used by a good heart. Otherwise, it will eventually destroy the user’s entire race. That sign lets us know if it’s being used by a good heart.”

Nonimora began climbing up a tree a short distance away.

“It will take two days if we keep walking this slowly. Night will fall soon, so find a sleeping tree. Also find something to eat and drink.”

Given the height of the tower, she was probably right.

“Understood.” Akuto shouted up to Nonimora. “What do you mean by a sleeping tree?”

“The trunks of some trees glow and they have big leaves. You just have to take some of those leaves.”

That reply was followed by a few fruits flying toward Akuto.

Some were large and some were small, but he caught them all. Nonimora then dropped down and landed on his shoulders.

“I’m impressed you caught them all,” she said with a smile.

“Did you throw them at me assuming I couldn’t?” He smiled too. “That’s a problem.”

“What kind of fruit is this?”

Keena half climbed up Akuto’s arm and peered at the fruits he held.

“The small ones are food and the big ones have juice inside.”

Nonimora stood up and ran ahead, but she soon turned back and called toward the others.

“I see a glowing trunk over here. Let’s get some sleep.”

They followed and did indeed find a strange tree that gave off a faint light from its trunk. The straight trunk looked like that of a palm tree, but it also looked like a fluorescent light sticking vertically from the ground.

“Is this made to help anyone who gets lost here? It seems a little too convenient to me.”

“If too many people lived here, the trees would be gone before long.”

“Does your village have a restriction on children?”

Akuto tried to continue the serious conversation, but Keena tugged on his arm and cut him off.

“Forget about that. I want to eat.”

Keena looked unexpectedly troubled, so he put down the suitcase to create a place for Keena to sit and began peeling one of the fruits.

“Sorry. Are you hungry?”

“That’s not it…”

Keena’s odd lack of energy worried Akuto.

“If anything is bothering you, just tell me.”

“Mh,” she groaned. “I’m fine.”

He was unsure how to respond to that.

“Fine, but do tell me if there is something.”

He tried to be as kind as possible, took the soft, futon-sized leaves that Nonimora carried over, and cleared the rocks from the ground.

“The sun is setting, so let’s eat and go to sleep.”

Nonimora called over Keena and Korone and then sat down.

“This might be hard for you if you’re not used to it, but it’s only for one more day,” she said. “You can rest easy knowing this is the only night you’ll have to do this.”

“I’ll be fine, so worry about Keena,” said Akuto. “But if we eat like this for too long, we might not get enough sodium, so we can’t keep this up. And in Keena’s case, the lack of rice might be the problem.”

He turned toward Keena, but she restlessly ate the fruit and said nothing.

Once Nonimora finished eating, she immediately lay down to sleep.

“It isn’t cold, but you can place the leaf over you if you want. I’d like to have hem-hem, but we need to preserve our strength.”

She was snoring in no time.

“That’s kind of amazing. Should we get to sleep too?” asked Akuto.

Keena nodded, but then said “excuse me” and walked off.

Akuto assumed she was using the bathroom and Nonimora had told them how to recognize the trees meant for that purpose.

“By the way…”

After Keena disappeared into the trees, Korone brought her face in toward Akuto after remaining fairly inconspicuous up to that point.

“Wah! What is it?”

“Now that the empress is not here, I would like to point out that she seems worried about something.”

“I agree. I just wish she would tell me what the trouble is.”

“I know what it is. It is you.”

This answer surprised Akuto.

“Really?”

“It is because you are giving Nonimora-san too much attention,” declared Korone.

“Well, I am talking with her a lot now, but that’s because-…”

“I know you are not doing so maliciously. But please try to remember that the throne is a burden to her. Right now, you are behaving more like the demon king than a normal person. Of course, that is due to who you are, so it is unavoidable.”

“That’s going a little too far… But it is true I may have been too focused on trying to do something about everything that’s going on. Normal people don’t talk about entire nations like that.”

He was a little confused, but he somewhat understood.

“Precisely. But it is also true that the empress must think about the larger world for a while. And that larger world may even go beyond the level of nations.”

“You mean the Formless Power?”

“That power seems to be connected to her, so it is only natural she would feel uneasy. Unlike you, she does not have the confidence needed to wield such great power.”

“You may be right.”

Akuto felt embarrassed over his own nature. Nonimora had a sort of philosophy and he had something similar, even if it had a different focus. On top of that, he could sympathize with Nonimora’s way of thinking. He sensed something in her that could reform the empire. But he now realized that Keena wanted him to move away from that. All of the girls around him were unusual in some way or another. Keena was especially unusual, but her lifestyle was not all that different from a normal girl’s.

“I need to apologize.”

“Apologizing is not enough.”

Korone readily rejected Akuto’s suggestion.

“Eh? Then what am I supposed to do?”

“That is simple. You make love to her. Or as we seem to be calling it recently: hem-hem.”

“C’mon, stop joking.”

Akuto waited for Korone to reply, but she never spoke up to admit it was a joke.

“You aren’t joking?”

“I am fairly serious.”

“Fairly?”

“About 90%. The remaining 10% is sexual teasing.”

“Y’know…”

“At any rate, the empress wishes to reduce her unease. I am not telling you to penetrate her. I doubt that is what she wants right now.”

“Penetrate…?”

“That word choice was 90% sexual teasing. But be that as it may, please love her. Even embracing her would work.”

“Hm…. You might be right.”

Akuto began to seriously worry about the issue.

“I will now enter power-saving mode, aka sleep. Please take your time and deal with this.”

Korone sat next to Nonimora and closed her eyes. She seemed to be restricting her own functions.

That was when Keena returned.

“The toilet tree is amazing.”

She sounded excited and more like her usual self.

“You don’t have to get into the details.”

Akuto replied as he always would and rolled on his side. Keena lay down next to him and they remained silent for a while.

The sun had fully set and the glowing tree covered Keena’s face in pale light. The leaves of the trees completely hid the sky and the occasional glowing tree in the distance provided dim light much like streetlights in a lonely town.

“A lot has happened,” began Akuto.

“Eh?”

Keena sounded surprised.

“I thought I should apologize.”

She then replied in an unexpectedly light voice.

“But you haven’t done anything worth apologizing for, A-chan.”

“Still…” His voice grew more and more serious. “I feel like I haven’t been thinking about you much lately.”

“Eh heh heh.”

Hearing that, she gave a careless laugh and moved closer to him.

“If you finally understand, that’s all that matters.”

“It must be tough. For me, it’s become nothing more than another part of everyday life.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s tough,” she whispered back. “It’s somehow scary.”

“Scary?”

“There’s a me who isn’t me.”

“Yeah. I know about that to a certain extent.”

“I think that other me can do way more amazing things than the real me. She might be able to do things I really can’t do.”

“I know that too.”

He started to feel he understood the fear she felt.

“So when you’re doing all this amazing stuff, I started feeling that you need the other me instead of me,” she said as her voice grew quieter.

“It looked to me like you were getting along pretty well with that other you.”

“That’s what scares me. I can’t tell how much of me is actually me. But there’s still the normal me and I can’t really do all that much…”

She began speaking more quickly to hide the trembling in her voice. Noticing that, Akuto looked over and she turned away, but not before he had seen the slight twinkling of tears in her eyes.

“Keena.”

He called out, but she did not turn back around.

“So I felt like you were only paying attention to me for the other me and I was thinking about something I could do for you and that the other me couldn’t do. I thought you might feel you needed me if I could have hem-hem with you.”

As she spoke, she began sobbing enough to be noticeable from the side.

“The other me is like me in some ways, so she’s still me, but sometimes I realize I’ve been doing things that aren’t like me and sometimes I talk as the other me instead of me, so I wonder if the things I’m doing are really me or not.”

Her shoulders started trembling as she began confusing even herself, so Akuto pulled her close and embraced her.

“Hyah!” she shrieked.

“Um… I’m not sure I can put it in words well, but I’ll try.”

He brought his mouth to her ear as if burying his face in her hair.

“Y-yeah…”

She had completely stiffened.

“You are important to me. I need you, but it has nothing to do with how useful you are. What’s important to me is how you eat rice all the time and how you take naps next to me. What I need you to do is be with me for no real reason. Having no reason is the best reason for me.”

As he whispered to her, he gathered strength in his arms.

She let out a short breath and trembled.

“Sorry. Did that hurt?”

“No. I was just really happy.”

She began squirming and turned her body to face him.

“This is…kind of embarrassing.”

Akuto blushed as he looked directly into her eyes.

She did the same.

“But it’s better to face each other,” she said while hiding her face in his chest.

“Yeah.”

He moved up one arm and wrapped her hair around his fingers. While holding her head to his chest, he gently stroked her.

“That tickles.”

She drew back her head but then raised it to look up.

Akuto drew his head back too and their gazes met.

Neither of them could look away now.

The silence was filled with nothing but the thick rhythm of their exhaled breaths and beating hearts. Tension surrounded them and it felt like either of their voices would cause it to burst.

"…Do you want to do it?" she asked.

Akuto was unsure what to say.

As time passed and he remained silent, they simply stared into each other's eyes.

He moved his fingers from inside her hair and slid them down the back of her neck.

She let out a quiet voice.

And…

"Don't have hem-hem in secret!"

Akuto and Keena moved apart as quickly as if they had leaped back.

They timidly turned toward Nonimora, but for some reason, the girl was drooling and fast asleep.

"She was talking in her sleep," said Keena in surprise.

"That's one hell of a thing to say in your sleep," complained Akuto.

But then the two of them laughed a bit.

"I think I'll go to sleep too," said Keena before innocently leaping into his chest.

"Yeah, it's about time we did."

He wrapped an arm below her head and she curled up on her side using his arm as a pillow and resting her knees on his thigh.

"But something's bound to happen next time."

"Eh?"

Akuto tried to ask what she had said, but he received no reply. She was already giving the quiet breaths of sleep.

"Milady, that would be difficult."

That pathetic-sounding comment was made by a young member of the Hattori ninja forces.

"But we have all the equipment here, right?"

Yuuko attempted to force through her request.

She was in the communications room of the headquarters at a port town a few dozen minutes by train from the capital. Four operators stood in front of the communications equipment covering one wall, but Yuuko had asked their chief to send their own footage out to the imperial people.

While Hiroshi was being sent out, she wanted to do something to help him.

“That isn’t the issue. It is probably CIMO 8’s doing, but all our footage is being supervised by the cabinet. It would be technically possible, but no one wants to be responsible.”

The ninja in a military uniform drew back from and tried to oppose Yuuko who also wore a military uniform.

“The responsibility can lie with my father.”

“Please do not be ridiculous. Listen. The Hattori ninja forces specialize in information warfare and we do not want to be manipulated by CIMO 8, but this goes beyond authority. The entire network is being monitored.”

“Really?” asked Yuuko in surprise.

“Yes. In this day and age, anyone can send a guerrilla message over the network, but the cabinet office is somehow preventing any footage from being sent over the network. Not only is the news being censored, but it is being actively provided by the cabinet office. And it differs from the information we are receiving,” warned the ninja.

But Yuuko was not going to back down.

“Brave is heading to the scene. If we show them that, everyone will realize the truth.”

“That may be true, but how are we going to prove that CIMO 8 wants war with the Republic? We can’t do anything without that proof.”

“We just have to find that proof at the scene.”

“We cannot sacrifice the Hattori family for something so uncertain. Please understand, milady. If it does come to war, we will win, so everything else is a trivial matter.”

“That doesn’t make it okay. Everyone thinks it’s okay to go to war with the Republic because they don’t know what it is.”

Yuuko gave a troubled look behind her and saw Yoshie and Keisu who Junko had called in to help.

“Unfortunately, the operator is right.”

Yoshie folded her arms and thought. She had heard most of the details when she went to rescue Hiroshi from Rubbers and she had heard that The One had some kind of conspiracy.

“No one will believe this without proof. If it wasn’t for our past experiences with CIMO 8, even we would probably laugh off this incident with The One.”

“Then what are you saying we do? Brave is already on his way.”

Yuuko pointed at the mana screen being displayed by Yoshie’s handheld device. It showed the footage provided by Hiroshi as he was flying over a seemingly never-ending ocean. The footage was being sent directly to Yoshie, so it was not on the network.

“If the operator is right and we can’t send this over the network, an electronic warfare expert must be behind it. This is superhuman. Their codename must be the Electronic Fairy or something like that.”

Yoshie nodded repeatedly.

“That’s enough of that.”

“Really? Anyway, we have two possibilities. The first is to defeat this Electronic Fairy, but I don’t think I can. I hurts my pride as a hacker to admit it, but I have no information to work off of here.”

“And the other?” asked Yuuko expectantly.

Yoshie gave a bitter smile.

“That one’s simple but difficult. We convince the prime minister.”

“Eh?”

“The prime minister leads the cabinet and commands the military. At the moment, the prime minister is just doing what his intelligence office tells him to do. In other words, he’s listening to USD.”

“Oh, I get it. But there’s no way we can do that!”

Yuuko pouted her lips, but Yoshie grinned.

“Even so, we still have a chance. If we send some choice information over the network, it will reach USD. And since he was betrayed, we can assume he doesn’t like what The One is doing. At the very least, we can show him something. After that, it’s an internal problem for CIMO 8.”

“Do we really have to bet on something that might not work?” complained Yuuko.

Yoshie smiled in return.

“You were already planning to bet your entire family on something that might not work. A nice bet is pretty exciting, though. But when you get down to it, the show is only just beginning.”

Yoshie fell into her old habits and started speaking more casually.

“About that show,” hesitantly spoke up the ninja.

“What is it?” asked Yoshie.

“It really has begun now,” he said nervously.

“So it’s finally begun for real.”

Yoshie compared the footage from Hiroshi and the CIMO 8 approved news. Rewinding Hiroshi’s footage showed that a mana beam had fallen from the sky.

“Ah ha. So the first one to strike was their Codename Esper.”

The censored news only showed what happened a few seconds later: a Republic submarine fired a missile.

“If only Brave’s footage was clearer.”

“He flies surprisingly slowly.”

“Esper probably began the attack after sensing Brave’s approach,” muttered Yoshie. “That means Brave might not make it in time.”

“Are you saying CIMO 8 planned all this?”

“Probably,” answered Yoshie. “I bet it was them that cut off contact with the empress’s private ship as well.”

The ninja nodded.

“It would seem the Republic is attempting to avoid a fight. Instead of repeatedly attacking, they are fleeing while their king tries to make official contact. However, it seems the prime minister is doing nothing more than giving a curt greeting. Having the prime minister handle this is legally correct, but this would not have happened if we could contact the empress. They were trying to contact her earlier, after all.”

Hearing that, Yuuko approached the ninja with a clearly displeased look.

“If you know that much, why didn’t you stop this war?”

“Well…” He gave a troubled shake of the head. “When there are those in the highest levels who want a war, there is no way to stop it. Also, we didn’t know it would turn out this way. Just think about it. The empire has not fought an external war in over a thousand years. In fact, there is nothing

that could pose an external threat. We had never even considered the possibility of starting a war before."

"That's right. What everyone feared was the demon king devastating the empire from within. The only thing anyone talks about is not letting another demon king show up. But now that we've made external contact, it's obvious that this empire's entire system could become the aggressor. No, it might be that it already has."

Yoshie pointed at her mana screen.

It showed Kei sinking the Republic's submarines, one after another.

"Am I not going to make it in time?"

Hiroshi decided they must have planned it this way.

As he flew across the ocean that never seemed to end, it irritated him a bit how the lack of any obstacles allowed him to see the distant attacks.

—*I tried to look so cool back there, but will I be able to do anything at all?*

He was not fully aware what was going on between Kei and the Republic's submarines, but he could tell Kei was attacking the submarines in order to provoke them. He could also see the news being broadcast across the empire thanks to Yuuko and the others sending it to him.

The footage had a time lag and it was obviously manipulated, but a single story played out there: negotiations had broken down due to the Republic and they had started attacking the empire.

Footage of sinking submarines was already reaching him. He was about to catch up, but he was worried they had already been wiped out.

He heard a roar and a pillar of water rose high into the sky. Once he finally arrived, the battle was mostly over. He had happened across the final ship being sunk.

A large portion of the ocean surface was filled with bubbles from the destroyed and sinking submarines. A film of oil and scattered parts floated up along with the bubbles.

Someone Hiroshi had seen once before floated in the air above. Given the sequence of events, the boy had to have been there for several days without any supplies, but his beauty had not diminished in the slightest. Kei was just as elegant, bewitching, and cruelly charming as ever.

And the actions Kei had taken were just as…no, even crueler than his appearance. Unfamiliar people had been lifted up into the sky using his

magic power. Their skin color was a bit different from the imperial people. The biggest difference was the fin-shaped things on their arms. It was obvious they lived in the sea, but their silhouettes were definitely human. Those humans were forcibly held afloat with expressions of pain. There were around thirty of them, so they were likely the crew of several submarines. Seeing a single demon king holding that many people in the air brought fear up from the depths of Hiroshi's heart.

Hiroshi uneasily predicted the even uglier and impossible to ignore moment that was coming.

With a casual motion, Kei telekinetically tore off one of their heads.

Blood spurted ten meters upwards and it poured down like a shower. Kei fixed even that blood in place. Like water floating in zero gravity, countless scarlet drops colored the surrounding space.

This was truly shocking to anyone who could estimate how much magic power this would take, but it was even more frightening how much Kei was enjoying it.

The other people of the Republic grimaced in the air as they guessed they would be killed in turn. But Kei betrayed their expectations by ripping all of them in half at once. They remained conscious for a few seconds afterwards, so they all gained expressions of disbelief. Kei seemed to have been anticipating that reaction because he gave a satisfied smile after seeing their expressions.

Hiroshi saw it all clearly. He was using the zoomed-in footage from the camera on his suit, but he saw the expressions of the people from the Republic and the look on Kei's face.

After a short delay, the words cruelty, brutality, fear, and anger filled his mind. He felt something hard press against the core of his body and a hot emotion quickly filled him. He could hear nothing as something pressed out from within and threatened to explode. He was most likely shouting.

It was only then that Kei turned toward Hiroshi. He had likely known Hiroshi was there the entire time. It was possible he had hastened the killing because of it.

In a contrast to Hiroshi, Kei's expression was cool.

"Has anyone ever shown off a slaughter so beautifully? Were you the only one in the audience? Unfortunately, their king wasn't there."

Kei smiled gently toward Hiroshi.

His appearance was almost enough to cool down Hiroshi's heated head.

A giant sphere floated in the sky and it was made of countless smaller scarlet spheres. The droplets glittered in the sunlight. As they blew in the wind, fantastical rainbow-colored waves spread across the sphere's surface. The beautiful boy spread his arms in the center. It looked like a well-composed painting and it may well have been a piece of artwork made by Kei. He was aware of his appearance and ability, so he had used the lives of others to show them both off.

"I don't care about that! Stay where you are!"

Hiroshi charged in, ordered his suit to activate the mana canceler, and set all the weapons except the plasma balls on standby.

"Please don't rush this." Kei shook one hand. "The beauty has only just begun."

The scarlet sphere began to drop as if gravity had started working once more. Bloody rain poured down on the surrounding area.

The blood produced a rainbow.

It was most likely no different from a normal rainbow, but the colors looked horribly strange.

"Defeating you is easy!"

Hiroshi tore apart the rainbow as he flew, but Kei flew backwards to avoid him.

"I know that, which is why I'm running away. You're borrowing that suit, but it's yours for as much as you're authorized to do. Unfortunately, I don't know when it will be taken from you."

"I don't care!" shouted Hiroshi. "I'll do whatever I can! Stop running!"

Kei's actions and words were light as he evaded.

"No thanks. Since you still have your suit, it means he has allowed you to kill me. I did what I came here to do, so I just have to run away."

Kei seemed to slide through the air and he produced a transfer circle there. A moment later, he slipped inside it and vanished.

"Wait! What do you hope to gain with this!?"

Hiroshi's shout echoed futilely across the ocean as the bloody rain covered the surface.

<Calm down. We recorded the footage. Even if we can't make it public, it might reach USD.>

Yuuko's voice helped Hiroshi partially regain his calm. He was not aware of it himself, but he may have been shouting for a long time.

"Kita-san's equipment proved useful. I'm thankful."

He touched the camera and communicator attached to his suit's helmet.

"I'll return after filming the ocean surface."

He approached the area of ocean where the tragedy had occurred and recorded it. The blood had mixed with the seawater and lost its color, but sharks were already gathering around the corpses floating here and there.

<This is awful.>

He heard Yuuko, but he did not know what else to say. He could give into his anger and hurt the sharks, but it would accomplish nothing.

He then noticed that one of the objects being attacked by sharks was not a human corpse. A single dolphin was floating on the surface after presumably getting caught in the middle of the battle. Its fins had been bitten off and its white stomach was pointed upwards. A shark was biting at it from below and it would occasionally shake.

—*If it was only caught in the middle of all this, I feel sorry for it.*

As Hiroshi watched, he saw a different movement from the dolphin's stomach.

"Eh?"

The dolphin's stomach swelled up as if something was pushing from within.

Then a blade stabbed out from inside the dolphin and sliced its stomach open front to back.

"Someone's coming out."

Hiroshi prepared for a possible fight.

After the dolphin's stomach split open, an arm came out and Hiroshi instantly realized it belonged to someone from the Republic.

—*Come to think of it, he said something about not getting their king.*

The king had supposedly been aboard the advance fleet of submarines.

A young man with an imposing build appeared while covered in dolphin blood. Sharp eyes turned toward Hiroshi though the hair plastered to the man's face with blood.

"At the very least, I am the enemy of your enemy," said Hiroshi.

The Republic man slipped from the dolphin's stomach and into the ocean. Drawn by the scent of blood, several sharks approached the young man. With a flash of his knife, he grazed the tops of their noses which was enough to keep them away.

He lowered his head toward the ocean, placed the knife in a case on his waist, and rubbed seawater on his face. He used both hands to smooth his hair back, revealing the wild and fearless face below.

"It was painful, but I saw what happened outside. I do not know who you are, but I thank you for crying out for my men."

The young man's voice carried well and his tone held calm and sincerity.

"I am ashamed to be the lone survivor, but they went as far as to kill an innocent dolphin to save me. I cannot do anything to reward you now, but ask me anything once I end this. I am Marine, King of the Republic."

"I am Brave," said Hiroshi.

Marine nodded and started back into the ocean. In that instant, Hiroshi felt a stir in his heart, and he found himself yelling for Marine to stop.

"Please wait!"

"What is it?"

The man looked up and Hiroshi held out a hand.

"Let me work for you."

Marine looked puzzled.

"I have no reason to have you do that. Give it some thought and make sure this is not a momentary emotion."

Hiroshi was unsure what to say, but he held his hand out once more.

"Then at least let me work for you until you can meet the empress."

"The empress?"

"I have heard the situation. If you wish for a peaceful resolution to the succession issue, then we want the same thing."

After a moment of thought, Marine took Hiroshi's hand.

"I thank you, hero."

Meanwhile, Fujiko visited an apartment near the academy.

Normally, a young girl visiting an apartment would have a sexual undertone, but that nuance was wholly absent from Fujiko's visit. If anything, it resembled a break-in.

"You will be giving me answers."

She hung a rope down from above the apartment ceiling and wrapped it around the neck of the man sitting in the room. The tea table was overturned, the ramen bowl had rolled off and the noodles and soup had spilled over the floor.

"Wh-what answers?"

The man who kicked his legs and was unable to resist the lightly tightened rope around his neck had terribly unruly hair and bizarre glasses. He was Suzuki Issei, the former leader of the black magicians. He had protected the secrets of the black magicians until Fujiko – the very person strangling him now – had stolen them from him. After that, he had been captured by the priests, so he had wanted nothing more to do with her. But just as his life was getting back on track, Fujiko had appeared before him and there was nothing he could do.

"There is something I cannot understand just from the documents," said Fujiko. "Or perhaps I should say there is something I was able to see because of the documents."

She already had the black magician information she had stolen from Issei. It had almost all been technical information and had contained almost nothing on their network or origins. As such, that was what she wanted to ask about. As her elder, he would know more about the black magicians' origins due to hearsay and his experiences.

"Is there a connection between the Republic and the black magicians?"

"Is that all you want to know? …Oh, I guess there isn't about that in the black magician database that my password let you access."

He spoke while struggling to breath and pointed at his neck to tell her to loosen the rope.

She did so and asked again.

"Does that mean there is a connection?"

"I have no real proof, but it came to me as soon as I heard about the Republic's origins. When the empire was formed, I assume those who espouse absolute freedom left and made their own nation."

"I believe Kazuko said all such people died."

“You saw the database, didn’t you? It says the same thing, so this is speculation on my part. They might have some records on the matter in the Republic. I don’t know what you’re so desperate to find, but if you seek absolute freedom as the ideal of black magic, you should join the Republic.”

Issei’s casual wording caused Fujiko to tighten the rope.

“Don’t tell me you actually know nothing.”

“Ah… Th-that isn’t quite it. Let me tell you.”

He cleared his throat to begin speaking again.

“You aren’t making this up because you can’t breathe, are you?”

“No, I’m serious. …The demon king system has always been an internal thing. When you create a social system by building gods, everyone has access to all those resources. But to prevent people from killing each other, you set rules. And the one who deviates from those rules is the demon king.”

“You mentioned this before.”

“Yes, but after learning about the Republic, I realized this only applies inside the empire.”

“What do you mean?”

“Even if you reformed the current system and created a world based on the black magicians’ ideals, mankind would not be destroyed. The empire would be, though.”

Fujiko understood that much of Issei’s explanation.

“I see. Come to think of it, you’re right.”

“Yes, so even if the demon king starts a war, it doesn’t necessarily mean the destruction of mankind.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Fujiko.

“In that case, doesn’t it seem strange? If the demon king is just a weapon as Kazuko claimed, he has too much power. But if the demon king was created to truly destroy mankind as the gods claim, then he doesn’t have enough power.”

“If the demon king truly only has control over the empire’s internal resources, it does not reach the scope of all mankind,” muttered Fujiko.

No matter how heretical her thoughts were to the empire, her viewpoint was still bound within the empire. But once she freed her thoughts from that restriction, Issei’s point made logical sense.

“Kazuko should have known, but she said the Law of Identity doesn’t exist.”

“She was lying. Either that or she didn’t know the truth. It’s possible she didn’t. Even if the gods and demon king are complicit, neither the demon king nor the empire has the power to destroy humanity. If that power exists, it must exist outside. In other words, there is an external god. Or to be more accurate, there is a true god.”

It made sense and it matched what Fujiko had overheard Yamato Bouichirou saying.

“You mean there really is a true god?” asked Fujiko half in fear.

“I don’t like the idea either, but with this turmoil in the imperial family and the existence of the Republic, I have to assume so. You came to ask me this because you were worried about that, right?”

Issei removed the loosened rope and looked up.

Fujiko had already moved from above the ceiling.

—All of this suggests the existence of a true god? Who can stand up to a fear like that?

An unspeakable anxiety filled Fujiko.

Chapter 4: Colorless Flames

Junko viewed the ocean, but not in a romantic sense.

—*No one in the empire has looked at the ocean like this before.*

She was looking out the window of the headquarters quickly built on a viewing platform of a seaside town. The footage was being sent to the headquarters, but a manual that seemed to have been used since ancient times said that seeing the enemy with your own eyes was best.

Junko and the Hattori ninja forces under her command were in charge of relaying information from the front lines while her father commanded the actual front line unit. He could not head out to the front lines himself, but a member of the family had to be there to maintain their honor.

The land unit was gathered in that seaside town. Military land vehicles, soldiers, and air vehicles had been supplied to each division due to the emergency situation. Their guns were all turned toward the sea.

Several shadows were visible on the ocean horizon. They belonged to the submarines.

—*But Yuuko said they aren't moving anywhere.*

Junko had heard the situation thanks to an encrypted transmission from Yuuko, but she had not informed the Hattori ninja forces working here.

—*The Republic's king must be an incredible person, but he isn't trying to start a war.*

She could tell Yuuko was not lying, but it bothered her that the king named Marine had abandoned the battlefield. It suggested he had something more important to do.

"I hope nothing happens," she muttered aloud without thinking.

"Milady, kindness is taboo here," rebuked a Hattori ninja.

"I know that." She nodded. "But after seeing that…"

"That" referred to the footage of Kei sinking the submarines, but she had only seen the edited version. It had looked like the Republic attacked first and the later slaughter was not included.

She thought Kei was overwhelmingly powerful. That strength had not been an act. She did not know how serious the Republic had been, but the empire had been…no, Kei had been superior when it came to magical combat.

“I understand worrying about the damage to the Republic, but that kind of compassion is taboo.”

“That is not what worries me. It scares me that Esper of CIMO 8 is accepted by the world.”

Junko’s concern came from the prime minister’s announcement. He had said that the demon king had destroyed the Republic’s submarines. Also, Akuto had supposedly become a “great demon king” after giving into the might of the empress and had then sent a subordinate demon king to handle the Republic.

“True. I doubt the government has control of him.”

“That is not all. The people’s reaction scared me. If this is viewed as the empire’s secret weapon, none of them see a problem with it. Their view of the demon king is changing. I cannot believe that it has changed so much just by having an external enemy show up.”

Junko’s voice held more surprise than hatred.

“The empire’s greatest fear is being seen as its greatest power. I do understand how you feel, but that seems to be what has happened.”

Junko understood that too, but understanding it was not enough to erase the fear.

“In that case, how are we supposed to react if an even more external threat shows up? Do we rely on humanity’s greatest weapon and confront it?”

“Now is not the time to think about that.”

The ninja scolded her, but Junko could not accept it. She may have been instinctually sensing that the situation hinted at the existence of a true god that she had believed was a lie up to this point.

“He was always saying that people viewed their surroundings as a story, but why do I feel such a great tragedy approaching because something has appeared that does not fit in the story?”

“Milady…”

“Sorry. I will do my job as the decoration on the front line. Then again, all we are doing is preparing for a conflict that might not even happen. And even if it does, it will be nothing more than a skirmish and there is no reason we should lose. Isn’t that right?”

Junko spoke as if she did not believe it herself, but the members of the Hattori ninja forces nodded.

“Of course that’s right, milady.”

However, that answer did not come from the heart.

—*No one can be strong at times like this.*

Junko turned back to the horizon and let out a long sigh.

She began to wonder if everything happening now was a lie.

“If I head to that Merlai village, there is a chance I can meet the empress, right?”

Marine spoke to Hiroshi who was carrying him.

Hiroshi flew across the ocean, checked the coordinates of the Merlai village that Yoshie had sent him, and nodded.

“We still haven’t received any word from them, but she had bodyguards. She should be fine.”

Marine had asked to be taken directly to the empress. And if the Jewel Branch of Hourai was there too, that was all the better. Taking him there was sure to increase the odds of avoiding war. At the very least, it was a better chance than having the king return.

“Why did you only contact your country instead of returning?”

“The fact that we are a republic and yet have a king means that the king does not have absolute power. The congress of nobles has real power and I cannot stop them if they are in agreement.”

“Will the nobles choose war?”

“We already hated the empire and they are sure to have seen what happened.”

“I…can understand that.”

“I contacted them to tell them I am alive, but the nobles are desperate to send out the military,” said Marine. “I was forced to accept that much, but our goal is to seal the dreadful Formless Power using the Jewel Branch of Hourai.”

Hiroshi realized this legend of the Formless Power was different.

“The Formless Power is dreadful? And why do you hate the empire? There’s a lot I want to ask, so could you just go back to the beginning?”

“The Republic is a country made up of the people who broke free from the empire. They opposed the empire’s rule that used the system of the gods and it grew into a conflict, but they lost and were forced to escape to the bottom of the ocean.”

“Why the bottom of the ocean?”

“That was the only new land. It also helped that they were able to manipulate their DNA. But the biggest reason was…”

“The biggest reason was?”

“No, never mind. That is a sad reality.”

Marine shook his head and Hiroshi did not press further.

“Since then, our nation has lasted just as long as your empire. Interaction with the empire was forbidden and that was enforced to a large extent. Even so, the people of the Republic have visited the empire on occasion. There are plenty of rumors of that.”

“There are plenty of rumors here of monsters appearing from the sea, but I find it hard to believe the gods would overlook that.”

“We are a mana culture just like you, so we would have been recognized as unbaptized foreigners. We have our own system to replace the gods and our system allows everyone to use magic equally.”

“And that doesn’t lead to conflicts?”

“People can only use magic on the level of their personal mana. We have forbidden modifications to increase an individual’s mana like that demon had done and that restriction is strictly enforced. There are differences in magical strength between individuals, but it is only a slight variation. It might help to think of it like a society where people are allowed to carry weapons.”

Marine had referred to Kei as a demon.

“So that’s why you lost.”

“We had mana weapons and mana cancelers, but his strength simply outdid all that. I now know that the human will’s control over mana particles is the greatest weapon. At the same time, I have greater respect for our ancestors who cast that aside and created the Republic. There is only one power that can overcome that.”

“Which is?”

“A sealed weapon from before our mana civilizations. It is known as a nuclear fusion explosion. I assume you have at least heard of it.”

“I know it is the ultimate form of energy. Of course, it can’t be controlled at all.”

“Our mana civilizations were created by casting that aside.”

“Are you saying that’s what the Formless Power is?”

Hiroshi was taken aback, but Marine smiled and shook his head.

“No, it isn’t. In the Republic, the Formless Power is said to be the power that gave rise to our minds. It is believed to bring about true liberation. Personally, I say it must be researched before it is used.”

“The empire says it is the power that leads the people,” said Hiroshi.

Marine gave a thoughtful look.

“I want to say a legend is just a legend, but that may be too optimistic. Then again, it is also somewhat nihilistic to say there is no such thing as a power that leads the people.”

“The legend told by the Merlai says it will bring about a good result if used by one with a good heart and it will bring a bad result if used by one with an evil heart.”

“It seems strange to be using good and evil as such an absolute standard. Of course, ‘true liberation’ is far too vague as well. But since it gives an image of destruction and creation, I do not think we should deal with this power too lightly.”

“In that case, you should get along with the empress and her bodyguards.”

Hiroshi smiled and Marine saw it through the open mouth of his visor.

“Then is no one trying to release that power?”

Marine smiled as well.

“No. There’s nothing to worry about,” said Hiroshi.

The Merlai island finally came into view.

“We’ll be there soon,” said Nonimora excitedly.

The tower they had been following looked very close now. In fact, it had grown so large they could not see the whole thing at once. If they craned their necks upwards, they could just barely see the light at the peak.

“We need to make contact once we reach the village. A lot of people have to be worried. Oh, right. Is it even possible to contact the empire from the village?”

Nonimora nodded at Akuto's question.

"You can use mana in the village, so you can make contact."

"Then can we hurry back with a transfer?" asked Korone.

"Good question. It should be possible," agreed Akuto.

But Nonimora shook her head.

"The village doesn't have enough energy for a transfer all the way back to the empire."

Just as mana was not infinite, the energy it used was also limited. They may have lived in a magic civilization, but they were merely using the energy supplied to them. The imperial mainland transmitted energy through the ground or through the mana itself. This made the energy usable in almost any part of the empire's territory, including over the sea, but the Merlai village only had the energy from their own energy facility due to the surrounding trees that absorbed mana.

"While you can make contact, it will be passing through the high-altitude mana, so it won't be very effective," added Nonimora.

"But you were really powerful," pointed out Akuto.

It had taken an incredible amount of power to grow the plants that had enveloped the school and Nonimora's speed during the battle had been remarkable.

"I mentioned it earlier, but I used a portion of the Formless Power for that. I have a good heart, so it produced good power. It isn't that difficult a thing."

She smiled innocently.

"The Formless Power, hm? I don't know what that is, but I have a feeling we should follow the legend of the Merlai since you have the closest contact with it."

"Anyway, I want to eat some rice when we get there," said Keena.

"You haven't had rice in a while, come to think of it."

"Unfortunately, we don't have much rice. We eat moco-moco."

"Ehh?"

"Don't worry. It's really good. And when you're visiting a different place, you should eat different things. By the way, you're in a much better mood than yesterday. Did you have hem-hem with him? If you do it right, that can really bring harmony between a guy and a girl."

As she spoke, Nonimora elbowed Keena in the butt.

“I already told you…”

Keena blushed and wasn’t sure what to say.

“A-anyway, the jungle’s opening up.”

Just as Akuto said, their vision opened up as they stepped out from between giant trees. A wooden village was visible beyond some shorter trees and grass.

“Oh, it’s the village. I’ve made it back.”

Nonimora sounded deeply moved.

The village was made up of ten to twenty buildings. None of them had multiple stories and they all had simple designs with grass roofs. They were located on either side of a central road and a river flowed by on the other end of the road.

“Hey!” called out Nonimora.

Faces started appearing in the windows. They all had the same skin color and large, curious eyes as Nonimora.

“The tribe leader is back!”

“Call the elder!”

After those voices, a crowd of villagers appeared. Not many seemed to have been working and their ages ranged wildly. There did not seem to be a difference in the features of the children and the adults. They all wore rough clothing, but some wore the same style of clothing as Akuto’s group.

“This village likes to keep things loose. You might find some things rude, but worrying about it will only make you hungry. Try to let loose while you’re here. Don’t let your pakk-pakk get loose, though. Guys don’t like that.”

With that comment, Nonimora walked further into the village.

As Akuto, Keena, and Korone followed, the villagers peered curiously at them.

“Eh heh heh.”

Keena waved at them and the villagers waved back.

Korone made a V-sign and some of the villagers began copying her. When Korone noticed, she brought her right hand around behind her head and tugged up on her left ear. The villagers copied that with a smile as well. She then wrapped her arm around her neck to bring her right elbow up to her face and licked the tip of her elbow. The villagers tried to copy her, but they

looked confused and surprised when they could not. Finally, all of them were desperately trying to bring their elbows to their faces.

“Stop giving them strange new fads,” said Akuto.

Korone expressionlessly rotated her elbow at a strange angle.

“This is how to tell if someone is a L’Isle-Adam. Feel free to use it if you are ever having difficulty determining if someone is one.”

“Who gave you that ability?” he complained.

Meanwhile, Nonimora said they had arrived at their destination.

At the center of a park on one end of the village was a building that looked modern even by the empire’s standards. The village contained a mixture of inorganic and organic structures and it was unclear which one was dominant. Simple organic houses were preferred for residences, but facilities even more modern than the imperial mainland were used for the few infrastructure maintenance buildings.

However, the park building was of a different style than those for infrastructure maintenance. If anything, it looked more like the series of structures they had seen in the moon city. Most likely, the buildings of the dawning age of the empire had looked like that. The tower that was said to seal the Formless Power rose up from that building like a thick tree.

“Is this the building you said had the ship to the star?” asked Akuto.

The building was about five stories high and about the size of a general hospital. It was too small to hold a spaceship.

“Yes. The ship isn’t all that big. It’s about the size of a few trucks from your empire.”

As Nonimora said that, an old man walked out of the building. His eyes and mouth were buried in the thick wrinkles covering his face. His face seemed to be made from nothing but a few horizontal lines. Akuto guessed he was unimaginably old.

“Oh, elder!”

Nonimora energetically raised a hand.

One of the elder’s wrinkles opened and a voice escaped.

“Welcome back. Who are they?”

“The empire’s current empress and her bodyguards,” explained Nonimora.

Keena and Akuto greeted the elder and he let out a light groan that might have been a laugh.

“Ho fo ho. I assume that means the Jewel Branch of Hourai is here?”

“It is.”

Keena pulled the box from her bag and Nonimora explained.

“Yeah, she brought it with her. Empress Soga Keena here said she would give the position of empress to me, but after speaking, we decided to come here.”

The elder nodded.

“That is fine. Please, come in.”

He began walking again and the others followed him inside.

Akuto’s intuition told him the building had been created as a laboratory.

“The Jewel Branch of Hourai is the key for the ship to the star, but that is not all.”

The elder began speaking despite no one asking any questions.

“Nonimora said it is needed to use the Formless Power.”

“True, but that wording is not the best.”

The elder boarded an elevator, waited for the others to follow, and pressed the button for the fifth and highest floor. The elevator ascended, the door opened, and they stepped out into a large floor with no walls. It was filled with a thick cylinder that was likely the tower entering the building. A portion of the tower’s wall had a hole in it. But the word “hole” was not quite right as the cylinder was hollow. The hole felt more like a door to the inside.

“This is the ship to the star.”

The elder pointed inside the door.

Just as Nonimora had said, a streamlined ship about as large as a few trucks was located inside. But if they had not been told it was a ship, they might not have viewed it as one. It looked more like a missile sitting on its side. It was silver, it had no windows, and it had no writing on the surface.

“The Formless Power is sealed inside here,” said the elder. “Even if we have nothing, we can use a portion of that power.”

Nonimora nodded in agreement, but Akuto found that answer difficult to accept.

“What exactly is the Formless Power?”

“It is a mysterious power. But I suppose that does not answer your question. If I had to explain it, I would say it is like the human mind. It is as if tens of thousands of human minds were gathered together. This is only a portion of it here, but it is still a tremendous power.”

“It doesn’t seem like you would need a power like that very often,” said Keena.

“Precisely,” agreed the elder. “But there is something you must know. You should think of the Formless Power as a living being. It is said the Jewel Branch of Hourai chooses the emperor or empress, but you could also say that the Formless Power chooses them.”

“Why do you know that?” asked Keena.

He touched the side of the tower and a mana screen appeared.

“I am the third generation of researchers. But there is nothing more to research, so all I can do is pass down my knowledge.”

“What do you mean there’s nothing more to research?” asked Akuto.

The elder gave the same strange laugh as before.

“Ho fo ho. Once I knew it was a collection of human minds, there was nothing more I could do. If you have some knowledge, then you might understand this better: this ship to the star contains a device to hold an energy field in place. In other words, it is nothing but an empty container. But when devices to measure electric potential and magnetism were attached to the container, it reacted. That reaction is displayed at the top of the tower. The subtle changes are shown with color.”

“It’s empty but it reacted? Are you sure it wasn’t just a mistake?”

“I have detected energy coming from empty space. The Formless Power might be an infinite power.”

“Infinite…”

Akuto was dumbfounded.

“But the most mysterious aspect of all is why I referred to it as a living creature. The reaction from the Formless Power can be changed with human emotion. As Nonimora told you, the people who have lived in this village long enough can borrow a portion of the Formless Power.”

Akuto found something about that hard to accept.

“Are you sure that isn’t us jumping to conclusions? How could a power understand human emotion?”

“Naturally, everyone thinks of that as impossible. But they understand when it comes to a living creature. Emotions are nothing more than input and output. The process may be quite complex, but set rules can be quickly determined. However, the bigger problem is the fact that this power is welling up from empty space. This actually seems to support the unscientific idea that, if complexly bonded amino acids cannot produce consciousness, that consciousness must come from empty space. And to put it simply, this is the truth, so there’s no use arguing.”

“The truth?”

“The Formless Power has taken a liking to Nonimora. She seems able to communicate with it the best. Even dogs can prefer some people over others, right? But the foundation of that preference cannot be explained with science.”

“Whether you accept it or not, the truth is the truth, huh?”

Akuto stopped arguing, but that brought a problem to the forefront.

“Then did you send Nonimora out in order to…?”

“Yes. The empress needs to come up with an approach for dealing with this power. At the very least, it is a problem that the Formless Power likes her even more than Nonimora.”

Even if Akuto did not accept the elder’s explanation, this power did seem able to amplify magical power. It was a political problem if the empress could use it.

“But first, you should return the Jewel Branch of Hourai,” said the elder.

“Return it?”

Keena sounded confused, so the elder pointed at the ship to the star.

“The tower, ship, and everything else here save the Formless Power were created during the dawning age of the empire and I know what they are for and how to use them. The Jewel Branch of Hourai is the same. It is meant to control the Formless Power, but it is primarily a safety device that can erase it.”

“It erases it?”

“That is why it is said to choose the emperor or empress. It is thought that the Formless Power behavior is similar to deciding whether it will disappear or not.”

“Then it isn’t like only the one using this can use the Formless Power, right?”

“People near it such as Nonimora can also use it, so do not worry.”

“Then…”

Keena pulled the box from her bag and removed the Jewel Branch of Hourai from that.

It was a wooden branch that gave off a dull light and had a few jewels attached.

The elder touched the surface of the ship to the star and holes for spheres to be inserted appeared.

“Those don’t look like they’re for a branch,” said Keena in confusion.

“Remove just the jewels,” said the elder.

She removed the jewels along with the small branches they were attached to. The main central branch remained as a short staff with a round stone at the end.

She placed the jewels in as if sticking small branches into the holes opened in the ship to the star. The holes had opened in just the right sizes for the stones, so they fit perfectly.

“That should do it, right?”

Keena lightly waved the staff that had been the Jewel Branch of Hourai, but she began looking around the area before seeing what it did.

“What is it?” asked Akuto.

“A bug,” she muttered while continuing to look around.

“A bug?”

“Yeah, there’s a bug. …Kyah!”

As she screamed, the Jewel Branch of Hourai was knocked from her hand.

“What!?’

“Eh!?”

Akuto and Nonimora cried out because the Jewel Branch of Hourai flew perfectly horizontally instead of falling to the ground.

At first it seemed to be flying on its own, but the insect clinging to it began to grow larger.

“Ohhh!?”

Nonimora could not help but cry out in surprise.

It had only been as large as a small fly to begin with, but it had grown to about thirty centimeters.

“So that’s it! He’s who destroyed the ship!”

Akuto caught on instantly.

A thirty centimeter human was flying while holding the Jewel Branch of Hourai which was as long as him. He seemed to be a magician who could grow and shrink and he had likely been aboard the ship from the beginning.

“I was waiting for this moment!”

The voice was high-pitched due to the small size, but it was indeed the voice of a human man.

He wore a body suit and mask that must have been able to grow and shrink with him. The suit's design was not recognizable, but he was clearly a member of CIMO 8.

"Insects must be exterminated!"

Korone swiftly pulled a gun from her bag, but the enemy seemed to have predicted that. He flew toward the floor's emergency staircase with the same speed as an insect. It almost looked like he moved instantly.

"If all you've got is speed…!"

Akuto held his hand out toward the emergency staircase and used mana to restrain the insect man.

But…

"…Eh?"

He was confused because he could not use mana properly.

"What is going on?"

Seeing that Akuto could not feel anything, Nonimora ran forward. She was fast, but the insect man was faster and smaller. He escaped her grasp and quickly escaped outside through the ventilation window. She began angrily stomping on the stairway landing.

"He got away!"

"Sorry. I couldn't use mana properly," said Akuto as he arrived at the stairs after her.

"That is most likely due to the low amount of energy in this area," said Korone. "The amount of energy you can use was reduced and you could not handle that unexpected gap."

"He took it from me. What do we do?" asked Keena.

"I cannot say this is not a problem," answered the elder. "But it should be fine for the time being. Anyone can use the Jewel Branch of Hourai, but the Formless Power will only respond to a member of the imperial family."

"Then I guess we've avoided the worst case scenario. I don't know what CIMO 8 is plotting, but…"

Akuto was cut off when Keena received a telepathic call.

"Ah," she said as the signal came from her handheld device. "The villagers were so much fun I forgot to call. It's from the old man."

Keena pulled out her device, answered the telepathic call, and a screaming voice immediately responded.

<Your Majesty! Thank goodness you're all right!>

The voice belonged to Yuuki Jouji of the Imperial Knights.

"Not so loud. Um, our ship suddenly crashed and…"

She tried to explain, but Jouji cut her off while sounding on the verge of tears.

<More importantly…well, that is quite important too, but I have news about the Republic!>

Jouji began to explain the current situation.

As Akuto listened in, he realized the "worst case scenario" he had mentioned before might be happening after all.

While traveling over the Merlai island, Hiroshi's visor displayed a warning and he informed Marine.

"Sorry, but this doesn't look good."

"What happened?"

"We're surrounded by a type of field that is this suit's weakness. It would take too long to explain, so just think of it as the enemy trying to drain the suit's energy."

"There is mana here, so I can fly too. I thank you for carrying me this far. I would not have made it on my own."

After thanking Hiroshi, Marine moved away and asked him a question.

"Does that mean there is an enemy nearby?"

"Yes. This is someone working with the one you called a demon."

Marine's expression changed when he heard that.

"Then they are my enemy as well. I will make up for what you lack."

"That would be a huge help. They're straight ahead and about fifteen degrees up."

Hiroshi used the information on the visor to locate the energy and informed Marine. The man seemed to see the target because he nodded.

A flying ship floated there. It was about the same size as the empress's private ship. It was near the limit of what an individual could own, but the

exterior made it clear this had not been bought commercially. It was colored black to hide its affiliation and obvious weaponry was left exposed.

“Their organization is named CIMO 8.”

Hiroshi spoke the name bitterly.

“The mana here is thin and there is not much energy. I’m not certain I can manage, so we might have to fall back.”

Despite the clear hatred in his eyes, Marine spoke calmly.

That made him seem very much like an adult to Hiroshi.

“If we can destroy the virtual alternate dimension producer, I can fight freely. As long as we manage that, we won’t lose.”

“Understood,” said Marine with a nod.

“I’ll do what I can while my energy lasts.”

Hiroshi flew toward the flying ship and watched the energy gauge in shock. It was lowering much faster than normal.

“What?”

He tried to figure out why. It likely had to do with the black flying ship. Not only was it dispersing mana, but it seemed to have its own energy unit as well. It seemed to be the same system as the Brave suit and it was absorbing the suit’s energy.

“Not good… Sorry, but I have to back off!” shouted Hiroshi.

He quickly accelerated toward the jungle below to avoid death from his suit running out of energy. Down there, he could at least release the suit and hide himself.

—*If that’s the same tech as the suit, this must be USD’s doing.*

He descended to the jungle while silently apologizing to Marine.

After Hiroshi descended to the jungle, Marine began fighting the flying ship, but Hiroshi was not the only one watching.

They were fighting in the airspace near the Merlai village, so it was visible from the ground there.

“The insect man flew that way. His mana is almost undetectable, but I have good eyes.”

Nonimora pointed toward the flying ship. She had run outside the building in pursuit of the stolen Jewel Branch of Hourai, but it seemed she had been too late.

“So he has allies on that ship.”

Akuto tried to gather mana in his hand to use magic, but it did not work very well. He had yet to grow used to the thin mana and low energy of the land.

“He said some place called the Republic has attacked and war is about to break out.”

Keena looked at Akuto worriedly.

“I don’t like not knowing the full situation,” he muttered. “And who is that fighting up there?”

Korone held out a telepathic communicator. Ever since he had become able to easily make telepathic contact on his own, he had not used that sort of item.

“A telepathic call?”

“It is from Kita Yoshie-san. It seems she has all the information.”

Sure enough, Yoshie was in the same headquarters as Yuuko and she began explaining the situation with almost no introduction.

<There are three important points. At the moment, there are three imperial candidates: Keena, Nonimora, and Marine who seems to be fighting now. He is the Republic’s king.>

“Why is he fighting CIMO 8?”

<CIMO 8 crushed the Republic’s advance unit. Brave rescued him and they headed your way in order to find a peaceful solution in a discussion between the leaders of the Republic and the empire. Incidentally, they’ve been jammed once again. The signal from Brave cut out.>

“Could this get any worse? I’m ashamed to admit it, but we just had the Jewel Branch of Hourai taken from us.”

<Well…that certainly isn’t good. But war hasn’t broken out quite yet. The front line is on the coast. Hattori Junko-kun is waiting at a coastal city there. After some discussion with her father, they’ve somehow managed to get the Republic warships on the coast to hold off on starting a battle. That’s the second important point.>

“I want to get back there as soon as I can, but there’s too little mana here to transfer back.”

<Try to find a way to get back and take Marine with you. I'm not too optimistic about this. I said CIMO 8 crushed the Republic's advance unit, but it was done by someone who seems to have the same abilities as you.>

"The same as me?" asked Akuto in surprise.

<Yes. They seem to have successfully turned a normal human into a demon king using the cells of yours they stole a while back. That demon king is currently staring down the Republic's fleet and no one can control him.>

"Does CIMO 8 want to start a war?"

Akuto raised his voice.

<It looks that way. But there's this eeriness to it. It's like there's something hidden behind it all. Um…It seems there's some conflict within CIMO 8 and one of them is trying to annihilate mankind. Also, this new demon king is on that person's side. That's the third important point. That one's on such a huge scale it surprised even me.>

"That's what's been going on while we've been wandering around the jungle?"

He was now convinced that CIMO 8 had intentionally sent them into the jungle.

"Then I'll go rescue him."

Akuto looked up into the sky, but the battle between the flying ship and Marine was already over. Marine seemed to have lost consciousness and he was being sucked inside the ship's hatch while still floating.

"It looks like I'm a step behind on everything today," he said bitterly.

As Marine entered the ship, someone else flew out.

After descending into the jungle, Hiroshi had made sure he was far enough from the flying ship and released his suit.

"Tch. What am I supposed to do? How useless is this thing?"

He began complaining about the Brave suit, but to his surprise, someone answered him.

"Sorry about that, but there is still a way."

"Eh?"

At first, he thought the bracelet that transferred the suit in had spoken, but his expression stiffened when he looked in the direction of the voice.

“I am aware this is quite selfish of me.”

Kento appeared from the jungle. In other words, this was USD, the mastermind behind the entire incident.

“Kh!”

Hiroshi frantically prepared to fire a mana sphere, but realized there was no mana around him. He felt surprise and fear at this fact, but he managed to suppress the fear when he noticed the surprisingly relaxed expression on Kento’s face.

“Are you my enemy or my ally?”

“Are you that insistent on having a clear answer to that? Unfortunately, not even I know the answer.”

Hiroshi realized that bizarre statement was unlike Kento’s usual daring self.

“What is with you? You released my suit when he was made into a demon king, but you let me fight out at sea and now you appear before me. What are you trying to do?”

As Hiroshi raised his voice, Kento adjusted his glasses and spoke calmly.

“I created the ship up above, but The One is currently aboard it.”

“What about it? You already said he betrayed you and I refused to help you. If you have something to say, then out with it! And as I said before, if you have a way of defeating that dog, then tell me!”

Hiroshi’s emotions exploded out, but Kento cut in.

“The One plans to give the Jewel Branch of Hourai to the Republic’s king.”

“And?”

“Not even I know what will happen if he uses that power. But I have a vague idea what it is.”

“And what is that?”

“The Formless Power is the sealed minds of all the people from another dimension and he is trying to free them.”

Even as frustrated as he was, Hiroshi took a moment to think.

“I don’t really understand what that means, but that isn’t just because I’m stupid, is it?”

“The One made use of the fact that it is so confusing. He made it sound like it would release further power into our magical civilization.”

“You don’t like getting to the point, do you? I’m sure there are all sorts of annoying theories behind this, but what are you trying to say?”

“I want to make sure the Republic’s king does not use the Jewel Branch of Hourai.”

Hiroshi laughed at that.

“Then don’t worry. He isn’t that kind of guy. If you want to stop it, then just stop that ship. You made it, right? I’m sure you can stop it just like my suit.”

“I of course made sure I would be able to stop it at any time, but I can’t do that now.”

“Why!?”

“The One has taken a hostage.”

Kento’s expression stiffened.

“I didn’t take you for the type to have that kind of weakness. So I just have to save that hostage, right? The One can’t see us here, so he won’t know you asked me to do this. Who is this hostage?”

Hiroshi did not even bother hiding his irritation and he noticed some hesitation on Kento’s face.

“What is with you? Is it because of this hostage that you’re acting weird?”

“Kei,” cut in Kento. “The hostage is Kei.”

“Eh?” said Hiroshi in surprise. “You mean the guy who was turned into a demon king?”

“Yes.” Kento nodded. “I investigated that device after the fact and I discovered an extra system The One added into the process. It allows him to freely make Kei self-destruct.”

“How could someone do that to an ally!?” reflexively shouted Hiroshi.

Kento shook his head sadly.

“That’s just the kind of allies we are.”

“You don’t seem all that nice yourself. …But wait. If you were only allies on that level, how does he qualify as a hostage? And your line of work is dangerous, so you had to know he would die eventually!”

Hiroshi came to a certain realization as he spoke.

Kento’s expression and behavior held the unease of worrying for another. He noticed the same thing he felt when he was worried for Yuuko.

“Wait. Don’t tell me…”

Hiroshi shook his head. Kei was male, but he did have a bewitching aura.

Kento slowly nodded.

“I am worried about Kei,” he said.

That fit with Kento’s overall behavior, but Hiroshi still had difficulty accepting it.

“So that’s your weakness. But so what? You had to have seen what he did to the people of the Republic!” he shouted. “Wasn’t that why you didn’t take my suit from me then!?”

Kento suddenly lowered his head.

“Please.”

“Eh?”

Hiroshi’s momentum ground to a halt.

“Will you please stop him? Even if he has to die, I want you to kill while he does what he has chosen to do. I don’t want him to be killed by The One.”

Hiroshi was unsure what to say.

“D-don’t be selfish! He was so cruel… And it was his decision to become a demon king. It was all so he could do that. So…so…”

But as he thought, he realized Kento’s wish was the same thing he wanted to do.

And more importantly, Kento had bared his emotions and bowed his head.

Hiroshi was confused, but something inside him produced the answer to it all. He was aware this was an answer Akuto could never give. He had often wanted to be like Akuto, but he now felt like he had found a path all his own.

“Depending on what happens… I really will kill him.”

Hiroshi gulped as he finished speaking.

“That is fine. He would prefer to die after being defeated. That’s the kind of person he is.”

“But the suit might not be enough. Can you at least give me some information on The One?”

“Don’t worry. I said there is still a way, didn’t I? I will release the suit’s functionality. You should be able to manage like that. Just follow the suit’s voice instructions.”

Once they began talking about an actual strategy, Hiroshi's head gradually cooled off. Even so, he was aware there was no need to change his mind.

"Where is Kei?" he asked.

Kento's eyebrows moved slightly.

"He should be confronting the Republic's army to ensure their king will do what he is told. That king saw Kei's earlier slaughter, so further attack should make for a decent threat."

"Is that how The One does things?"

Hiroshi put on the Brave suit and waited for Kento to make his adjustments. The man used a cord to attach a small device to the back of the suit and began manipulating the device.

"If you can power me up, why head for Kei rather than the ship?"

"I'm not sure you can stand up to that ship and The One would try to threaten you with war as well. In that case, it's better to stop Kei and reduce the possibility of war."

"Makes sense. But will I make it in time?"

"I'll give you a transfer spell. Use it once you approach the mainland and secure enough mana and energy."

"Understood."

Kento finished his adjustments to the suit and nodded toward Hiroshi.

"I'm counting on you."

"Sure. I'm not going to forgive you, though."

As Hiroshi flew away, the battle with The One's ship was already over and he did not see Marine anywhere. The man had not fallen down, so he had either been captured or agreed to negotiations.

"Why you are going out of your way to give me that?"

Marine was embarrassed by his circumstances, but his gaze remained resolute.

"Can you not simply accept it as kindness?" asked The One.

He was curled up on a large and shallow bucket-shaped cushion just like a dog.

This was the flying ship's lounge. Marine sat in a chair placed before The One and he was not restrained in any way. He simply looked like a man sitting with a dog.

But the situation created great tension. Marine had lost yet survived and he had been invited into the ship. That was humiliating to him, but he was not the type of man to despair or lose all hope over that. The One seemed to have realized that.

"We believe this power brings about true liberation, so I cannot use it so lightly."

Marine looked toward the Jewel Branch of Hourai that lay on The One's cushion. At first glance, it looked like a normal stick, but Marine knew how special it was.

"I am aware your legends treat it that way, but what do you think 'true liberation' means?" asked The One.

"Liberation is the Republic's ideal. The empire refers to it as black magic, but we are the founders of that ideal."

"But you have already achieved that, have you not?" rebutted The One. "Magic has been freed for all. Or do you begrudge them for making you live under the ocean for so long? Do you view liberation as the defeat of the empire?"

"That desire does exist in me as an emotion, but that is not the core of my ideals. Acquiring eternity is the true meaning of liberation."

"And?"

"We believe that the soul exists. A true soul, not the soul spoken of by the gods who created the empire."

"In other words, there is an afterlife? It seems the people of the Republic are actually more religious than the people of the empire."

The One's tone was mocking, but Marine's calm remained intact.

"You can think that if you want. Many of us do not fear death."

"Because death is liberation?"

"They also believe death should be given to the empire and that the Formless Power will do just that. In other words, they believe that one can freely control death with the Formless Power."

Marine had the look of a man faced with a difficult question. The fact that so many of his people felt that way showed just how greatly they resented being bound to the sea by the empire.

“From the look on your face, I take it you do not believe that,” said The One.

“Correct.” Marine nodded. “It is wrong to desire destruction from the Formless Power. It is even worse to think all mankind should become nothing more than souls.”

“But,” emphasized The One.

“But?”

“But we know that to be the truth. That is, that humans can become an eternal thought entity.”

Marine sensed something from that statement.

“You mean…it’s true?”

He could not believe it, but The One began explaining as if it was all obvious.

“Yes. After all, the Formless Power is made up of the souls of another race. The people of the empire are plotting to use that power as they see fit.”

Marine did not immediately reply, but after some thought, he gave a small nod.

“And what are you trying to do? Aren’t you part of the empire’s government? If so, I must ask what your true intentions are.”

The One stood up from the cushion.

“I see. My true intentions, hm? In that case, I must start by revealing my identity to you. I am what you refer to as an alien.”

Marine’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“Oh?”

His voice held a note of disbelief, but The One continued undeterred.

“The Formless Power is made up of my race’s souls. I wish to release that power because that would be the liberation of my race.”

“What will happen if they are liberated?” cautiously asked Marine.

He was using this answer to judge the truth of The One’s words.

“Revolution,” answered the dog calmly. “The very revolution you desire from the bottom of your heart.”

“Revolution!”

The calm left Marine’s voice for once.

That showed this desire truly was hidden deep in his heart.

“You wished for a future where the people of the empire and the Republic would truly share mental bonds and you saw that possibility in the Formless Power. Am I wrong?”

Marine remained silent, but not out of opposition. He could only imagine that The One had seen right through him.

“You can think of the Formless Power as something that grants the people’s wishes.” The One’s voice grew louder. “If it is released, my race’s souls will resonate with your human souls, it will influence your human hearts, and you will gain a magical power…no, a power even greater than magic. Isn’t the ideal of the empire’s black magic and the Republic’s magic to have a power that is directly influence by the human mind? That lies here. Release the Formless Power and you liberate us all. This will create a true interaction between our hearts and that will provide you with new magic.”

“New magic…”

Marine could tell his heart was violently shaken.

The dog before him seemed like the demons spoken of in legends. The dog tempted him with precisely what he wanted.

But Marine managed to retain his calm.

“I need more time. Releasing that power should not be a spur of the moment decision.”

He wiped sweat from his brow.

Their long time at the bottom of the ocean had created an intense desire for a world of mutual understanding. He had always thought of it as nothing more than a dream, but he could not help but feel something tremble inside him when the real possibility lay before him.

“Actually, I think you should make your decision sooner rather than later.”

The One shook his head and displayed a mana screen.

It showed the demon named Sakura Kei facing a Republic submarine unit.

“What!?”

Marine was left speechless.

“Will the nobles of the Republic listen to what you say?”

The One smiled cruelly.

Marine was now certain that this alien could read human minds.

He grew concerned he could not oppose such a being, but he tried to bluff.

“They will. And I am sure there are those who love peace in the empire. It is too soon to assume it will develop into-…”

“That’s right,” cut in The One. “War does not happen so easily. But your obvious concern shows you do not trust people that much.”

“Why do you desire the release of the Formless Power enough to use threats like this?” asked Marine bitterly.

“Because I wish to see what humans truly desire. There are some coincidental and intentional aspects to the beginnings of wars. But if humans truly brought forth what they desire, what would happen? I must find that answer.”

The One laughed.

“It’s nothing but curiosity?” asked Marine in astonishment.

“No. There is a deeper meaning, but you humans would not yet understand. Now, it is time you bet on this. There is no time left. Will you do nothing and watch as your nation is destroyed in war with the empire or will you use the Formless Power and grant the wishes of the Republic’s people?”

After The One’s somewhat theatrical statement, something happened in the footage on the mana screen. The submarines fired a missile into the air.

“No!” shouted Marine.

He knew what that missile was. Unlike anti-air or anti-surface missiles, the trail of smoke began to stretch high, high into the sky.

“Oh? That is the weapon that was abandoned in ancient times, isn’t it?” asked The One mockingly.

“It is a nuclear missile,” said Marine in despair.

That ballistic missile would rise high into the sky and drop down, so it was difficult to shoot down and could attack from a long distance. The warhead was nuclear, so a direct hit could break through even the mana civilization’s strongest shield.

“So this is your countermeasure against a demon. I do not know whether to call this an unfortunate fate or mankind’s just deserts.”

Marine wordlessly reached out toward The One’s nihilistic smile.

“What is it?”

The devilish dog gave a derisive laugh.

“Don’t play dumb. This is enough. I don’t want to give my answer in words.”

Marine approached and the dog's smile widened enough to show off his gums.

"Now, what is it humans desire? And what is it you desire?"

The demon grabbed the magic wand with his mouth and handed it to the man.

"Please make it in time."

Hiroshi rushed, but the suit simply could not move fast enough.

<They haven't done anything yet, so don't worry too mu- …Eh? The Republic just fired a missile?>

He heard Yuuko's panicked voice over the communicator.

"Yuuko-chan, what do you mean?"

<I'm not sure. My sister sent this information. It seems they shot a missile straight up like a rocket.>

"Is it turning into a war?"

<We don't know yet. Father hasn't given us any orders yet.>

"Please don't rush to action. If I can quickly defeat that demon and show we aren't all like that, we can still salvage this."

Hiroshi checked the mana density and the amount of energy filling the atmosphere.

"Still not enough to transfer."

As he was growing impatient, he heard Yuuko screaming over the communicator.

<Sis? What? What happened?>

"Wait… Yuuko-chan? What is it?"

He received no response.

<Sis! Sis! Answer me!>

He only heard Yuuko shouting and he could hear tense voices in between her shouts.

"What's going on!?" he shouted into the communicator.

Finally, he received a response from Yoshie.

<She's started panicking, so I took over. It looks like something has happened on the front line. We should have footage of it soon. Try to stay calm and watch it.>

Yoshie's tone was much more serious than usual.

"Wait. You can't mean the missile hit them…" he said.

<If only it had. This is worse.>

"What?"

<You could call it the collective form of their malice. Something is falling from the heavens. This is not despair or fear. It's malice.>

For once, Yoshie's roundabout expressions seemed suited to the situation.

And then the footage reached Hiroshi.

"Wait a minute. What is this…?"

"The Jewel Branch of Hourai has already fallen into The One's paws," said the CIMO 8 member who could shrink his own body.

"And the Republic's king is with him. Why are you trying to have him use the Jewel Branch of Hourai?" asked Akuto.

The sky was controlled by that CIMO 8 member and the countless giant insects he had created. They resembled rhinoceros beetles and they confronted Akuto with clear ferocity.

The One's flying ship floated in the sky past the insect army. After delivering the Jewel Branch of Hourai there, the man had sent out these insects to cut off Akuto's pursuit.

"That's right!" agreed Nonimora. "You're really annoying! Let us through! The Jewel Branch of Hourai is dangerous if someone with an evil heart uses it!"

She floated in the air with Akuto as they tried to at least approach The One's ship, but they could not fly as normal due to the insufficient mana density and energy quantity.

"There is no reason to be in such a hurry. By the way, I forgot to introduce myself. I am Codename Morlock of CIMO 8."

The man named Morlock was currently half the size of a normal human.

"I appreciate the greeting, but I'd rather you answered our question."

“You will find out soon enough, but I suppose I can tell you now. To put it simply, we want war.”

“That’s all?”

“For me personally, yes. There are others with more complicated ideas, but their plans won’t advance without a war. This will result in a wonderful world once it is all over.”

Morlock grinned.

“He creeps me out,” said Nonimora with a look of disgust.

“So if you get down to it, is CIMO 8 just insane?” muttered Akuto as he took a combat stance. “I couldn’t do anything before, but I’m getting used to this lower level of mana. I will be making my way past you next time.”

Morlock gave a mocking laugh.

“Not a chance. I’m an expert at conserving energy. You cannot hope to defeat me even with two of you. I always leave half of my body in a virtual alternate dimension, so I can change my size in reality and more efficiently use energy. Do you understand what that means?”

Morlock was attempting to brag about his ability, but another voice cut in.

“A-chan! It’s an emergency! It’s about Junko-chan!”

Keena shouted out from below where she had been in contact with the palace.

Her panicked state brought a change to Akuto’s expression.

“What did you people do?”

He turned a cold glare toward Morlock.

The look was enough to make the man flinch back despite his previous confidence.

“Uuh… Y-you can see that for yourself. Heh…heh heh…”

“What is that?” asked Junko.

As she looked out the window of the front line headquarters, she saw a trail of smoke rise up from the sea.

“It is a ballistic missile,” explained a member of the Hattori ninja forces. “It ascends to satellite orbit and then descends from there. Don’t worry. We can take it out as it falls. We have already given instructions to the aerial unit. Unless it has a nuclear warhead, we can suppress the explosion itself.”

“Unless it has a nuclear warhead?” she asked.

He nodded.

“We cannot suppress a nuclear warhead with mana, but that technology was abandoned long ago. They wouldn’t be using one.”

“I hope you are right. Anyway, this means a war is beginning, doesn’t it?”

She sounded disappointed.

“It may be unavoidable now,” he agreed.

Suddenly, Junko felt a chill on her spine.

—*What is this unpleasant feeling?*

She looked around the headquarters and it seemed everyone there shared the same feeling.

“Hey, did you feel something?” she asked.

People responded in turn.

“Yes. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“This is not a magical phenomenon. How strange. There’s no reaction in the mana at all.”

“Is it coming from above?”

Someone looked up into the sky.

Junko followed suit and looked up from the window.

It was starting to rain.

—*Rain? There was no sign of this earlier and isn’t the weather controlled in this region?*

But as the beads that looked like raindrops fell on the ground, those areas burst into flames.

“What!?”

She stared intently at it.

She could not see the flames clearly. The flames had no color and they merely caused the air to shimmer like a heat haze.

But they did not vanish. The colorless flames gradually spread across the ground. The grass burned, the green turned to black, and it all collapsed into ash. The same thing occurred everywhere that the raindrops fell. Rather than raindrops, it may have been beads of fire itself that was falling from the sky.

“Ahhhhh!”

A member of the Hattori ninja force cried out in fear at the sight before him. Junko followed his gaze and saw the source of his fear. The rain of colorless flames had started to melt the outer walls and windows of the viewing platform being used for the headquarters.

“Do not panic!” shouted Junko. “Try to use our shields!”

But she only received screams in response.

“We already are!”

“What!?”

The rain poured down over a wide area and started to turn everything there into ash.

“I-is this the enemy’s weapon?” asked a frightened voice Junko did not recognize.

“I do not know. But this cannot be happening!”

The flames were neither red nor blue and they burned through everything around them. The viewing platform itself was on the verge of collapsing. The view from the melting window showed the outer wall loudly crumble and then start to turn to ash and scatter in the wind.

Junko's face twisted in fear.

This was not the fear of facing certain death.

That rain of colorless flames looked like the malice of humanity to her.

She trembled and crouched down.

She felt as if depthless malice was bearing down on her.

Everyone watched it happen.

The invisible flames fell from the sky and burned through the city and the troops.

Everyone interpreted it as intense malice.

"Assume for a moment that divine punishment exists," said The One. "You think of it as coming from heaven, but it would only feel like divine punishment if someone down here wished for it to happen. After all, if good people are burned away, it would be viewed as nothing but an unfortunate event. That means this is the reflection of someone's heart. You wished for this. You of course wished for the elimination of the missile and that is what happened. But you also granted the wishes of the Republic's people. Some of them must have wished for the empire's army to be turned to ash."

Marine could tell better than anyone that The One was not lying. His connection to the Formless Power told him that power had truly granted the wishes of the Republic's people.

The mana screen showed the worst possible scene. From overhead, it looked like a giant gray circle had been drawn on the ground. But that had once been a city. It had all been burned away and an area of gray rubble and ruins had been created in an instant.

That seaside city resembled a painting of hell. No life was visible as far as the eye could see. The only movement was the ash blowing in the wind and the crumbling pieces of concrete.

"I have seen a true hell and a true demon."

As Marine muttered in despair, he stared at the demonic dog before him.

Akuto stared at Morlock.

However, he could see the footage in the back of his mind and he could hear the voices. The same footage that Keena was receiving on her device was reaching him even more clearly. He could only manage this thanks to his growing control over the weak mana. He had grown perfectly accustomed to the thin mana. Or perhaps the information reaching him had given him an unusual level of focus.

<We're receiving no response from the temporary headquarters at Katsuura!>

<Based on the information coming in from surrounding regions, an area with a radius of four kilometers was lost. The safety of the garrison is unknown!>

<Sis! Answer me, sis!>

<The reason for the loss is unknown. It might be a new enemy weapon.>

Various transmissions were flying about, but Akuto focused on a single point out of all that information.

"Is the eldest daughter of the Hattori family who was commanding the garrison dead?"

He asked the question in a low but surprisingly calm voice.

"H-how should I know?" replied Morlock.

He tried to force a mocking tone but failed. Everyone there could tell his voice was trembling.

"I am asking your opinion. Do you think she is dead or do you think she is alive?" asked Akuto.

"What good is it to ask? And there's no way she's safe. Several kilometers were burned away. If anyone had survived that, they'd have made contact right away."

Morlock was not sure why Akuto had asked that.

"So you do think the people there are dead. And what do you think about that?"

"Wh-what are you talking about? This has nothing to do with me. I didn't do it. From what I know, that was the manifestation of the Formless Power. I've heard what it does and it must have granted the desires of the Republic's people. You can't blame this on me."

While Akuto remained perfectly calm, Morlock grew more and more flustered.

“I asked you what you think about it,” further pressed Akuto. “You don’t have to think about whether it’s your fault or not. But if you can’t find anything to say, it means you didn’t think anything of it. Not a single thing.”

“W-wait. Have you gone insane? So what? No one would think anything about that. It’s just a bunch of people dying.”

“I just wanted to ask,” said Akuto indifferently. “For some reason, I am reluctant to kill. More than that, I’ve never liked influencing other people in the first place. You can call it cowardice if you like, but it meant that I would never feel like killing someone no matter how angry I got.”

Morlock seemed to guess where this was headed and his tension seemed to reach its limit. He stopped forcing himself to fold his arms and he quickly prepared for battle.

“Enough talk! You’re saying you’re gonna fight, aren’t you!?”

Akuto quietly shook his head.

“Fight? I may have been willing to do that before, but have you still not caught on? I believe I’ve found a reason actually worth beginning a unilateral slaughter over.”

A change came over the air around Akuto.

A moment later, his expression changed to something filled with more insanity and fear than anyone had ever seen before.

Afterword

Thank you yet again. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

The events of this novel begin a new multi-volume story. The plans for the rest are still relatively vague, but I do know the next volume will continue from this one. My personal hope is to continue for a few volumes, but you can look forward to whatever ends up happening.

I've written this so anyone who watched the anime could begin with Volume 10 and understand most everything, so please take opportunity to start reading. If you want to read from where the anime left off, you can start with Volume 6. That pattern works too.

Speaking of the Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou anime, all the DVDs and BDs have been released. This is your chance to see all of it, so I hope you buy it.

Recently, I have been watching satellite broadcasts. The minor sports are fun, but the biggest impact came from the old idol movies. Those are the ones with Kikuchi Momoko or the Onyanko Club as the leads. They are all strangely enjoyable in a way that confuses you as you watch them. I'm not talking about the standard opinion that the idols are terrible actors. I'm talking about how they made the most bizarre movies as if anything would be fine as long as it had an idol in it. Even so, it gives you a feeling that no normal work can. I know I shouldn't let it influence me too much, but it gives me this strange desire to create.

Lastly, I must thank everyone related to the series as well as the readers. There will be no more media-mix developments for the time being, but the novels should continue for a while longer, so please stick with me.

Now, then! It looks like we can enjoy this even more!

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